

interzone

A detailed illustration of a futuristic astronaut in a complex, metallic suit with a large, clear helmet. The astronaut is holding a baby in a small, transparent protective cocoon. The background features a large, blue, textured sphere (possibly a planet or moon) and a distant cityscape with tall spires under a starry sky.

JANUARY 2003

NUMBER 185

£3.50

Michael Bishop

Paul Di Filippo

Chris Butler

Matt Coward

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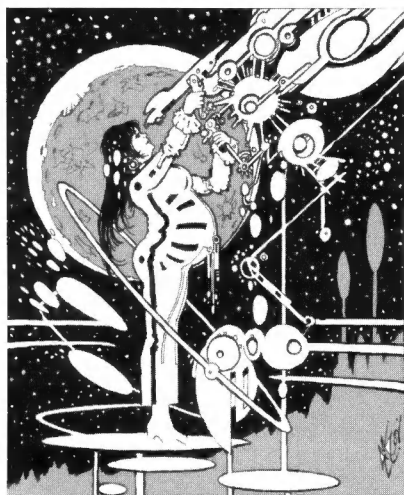
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COMING NEXT MONTH

New stories by Eric Brown, Martha A. Hood and an interesting range of other writers, old and new – plus our customary spread of non-fiction features and reviews. Do keep an eye open for *Interzone's* February issue.



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Interzone
217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL,
United Kingdom.

Subscriptions, back-issue orders,
general correspondence, books for
review, and enquiries about advertising
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Subscriptions:
£38 for one year (12 issues) in the UK.
Cheques or postal orders should be
made payable to *Interzone*. Overseas
subscriptions are £44. Payment may
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JANUARY 2003

Number 185

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Cover by SMS

Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 2003, on behalf of the various contributors

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution: Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd.,
Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Road, Rye,
East Sussex TN31 7LR (tel. 01797 225229).

Bookshop distribution: Central Books,
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 020 8986 4854).



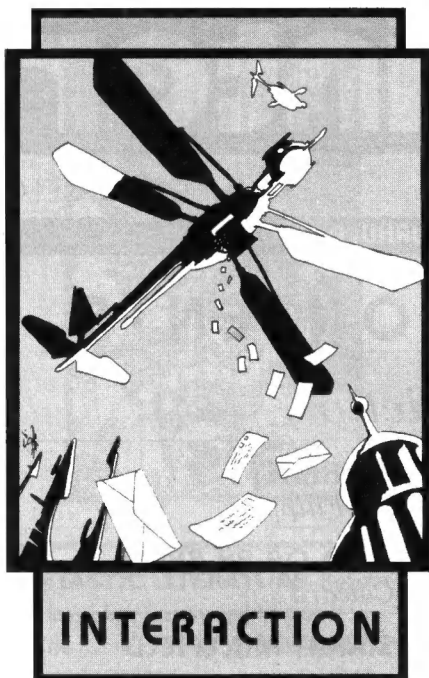
A Swift Review of 2002

Dear Editors:

Thanks for another good year. Stories I particularly enjoyed this year include:

1. "Blue Water, Grey Death" by Dominic Green from issue 175 (I won't look at dolphins in the same way in future).
2. "If Lions Could Speak: Imagining the Alien" by Paul Park from issue 177 (frankly, showing off, but successfully. Well, I think so anyway).
3. "Teaching the War Robot to Dance" by Tony Ballantyne from issue 178 (highlight of the year for me).
4. "Blue Portal, Parts I and II" by Eric Brown from issues 180 and 181 (I liked the anticipation! Having to wait for weeks to find out what happened next. More multi-part stories please).
5. "To Become a Warrior" by Chris Beckett from issue 180 (good, solid story-telling. Mr Beckett is creating a very interesting world or series of worlds in these stories).
6. "Time Spent in Reconnaissance" by Mat Coward from issue 181 (made me laugh out loud on the train).
7. "Old Tingo's Penis" by Geoffrey A. Landis from issue 181 (is it really that easy to invent a myth?).
8. "Posterity" by Christopher Evans from issue 182 (a short story with just about everything you could want really).
9. "The Whisper of Discs" by John Meaney from issue 183 (I now want to read his novels. What a good writer).

Looking at that list reveals that issue 181 was the best of the year



according to my lights. Particularly good non-fiction features include:

1. The appreciation of James White by David Langford in issue 176 (which had a good cover too).
2. The interview with Kim Stanley Robinson by Nick Gevers in issue 177.
3. The interview with Christopher Priest also by Nick Gevers from issue 183.

I generally enjoy the features by Gary Westfahl as well as Nick Lowe's "Mutant Popcorn." The controversy invariably kicked up by Evelyn Lewes also generally proves entertaining. Keep up the good work and I hope you have a good New Year.

Nick Dale
Lancaster

A Comeback Reader

Dear Editors:

As an irregular reader in the past, I picked up issue 184 with slight trepidation, having taken a studies-enforced break from the world of sf. I was reassured to note that the quality of your contributors, as well as the regular columnists, has not changed in my two years of non-reading. Daniel Kaysen's "The Comeback Season" stood out as my favourite, with a dense, action-packed feel to it. Could it be ripe for stage adaption, taking place in only one room as it does? I also enjoyed Julian West's "Vita Brevis Ars Longa," which neatly voiced, albeit obliquely, the underlying current of cynicism that surrounds much artistic endeavour these days. "Hole in The Wall" was a testament not only to the imagination of Zoran Zivkovic, but also the skill of the translator in so effectively rendering the story into English.

"The Happy Gang" by Neil Williamson was a story that I also enjoyed, except for one small error. The main character in the story was a Corporal Hawthorne. In reality, Corporals in the British Army were and still are junior NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) and as such are not addressed as "Sir," but as "Corporal" or "Corp." In an otherwise very well-researched story this detail jarred for me. I was also a little disappointed generally by the small amount of future-set science fiction in the magazine. A great deal of the work in this issue seemed to me to be either historical or contemporary horror/fantasy ("Frog Level," "We're All in This Alone"), or even fairly straightforward paranormal mystery ("Hole in the Wall"). Call me a sucker, but I like a bit of spaceships, or crumbling megacities, etc etc. Sometimes it feels to me as if sf can be slightly afraid to do what it does best, and have a go at guessing what the future will be like. I still intend, however, to get the next issue.

David Goodman

Neil Williamson, author of "The Happy Gang," replies: "It's nice to get a letter of encouragement like this. I apologize for the slip in historical accuracy, and have to confess to having been a little nervous that I might have missed something, given that I rarely attempt historical fiction. I did do research, honest – but some things slip by you. One of the advantages of tackling the kind of future-based science fiction that Mr Goodman is a fan of is that no one cries, 'that's not how it was!' He may be relieved to know that I'm currently writing a far-future planetary sf tale."

Price Rise

We are sorry to have to announce a price rise for *Interzone*. The cover price goes up to £3.50 with effect from this issue, and the subscription rates go up commensurately (but please note it's still cheaper to subscribe, whether for six issues or 12, than to buy the magazines singly). This is in fact our first cover-price rise in six years, since issue 116, February 1997. Postage and many other costs have crept up since then, and no doubt will continue to do so. We've had to tighten our belts in recent months, and various bills have been increasingly hard to meet, so we hope you will forgive us for the price hike and stick with us for the months and years to come. Thanks in advance to all readers for their support.

David Pringle, Editor

Ted Chiang

Dear Editors:

Many thanks for Neil Jones's review of Ted Chiang's *Stories of Your Life and Others* in issue 184. Since the interview with him (a few issues previously), I had been searching for more information on him.

His story "Understand" can be found on the Infinity Plus website at <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/under.htm>, and according to the Amazon website the collection will be available in paperback next summer.

Steve Connolly
Cirencester

Dinotopia

Dear Editors:

I was wondering if you could clarify something for me with Evelyn Lewes regarding her review of the first instalment of *Dinotopia* she watched in IZ 184. I'm not completely up to date about matters, but I do know that the SciFi Channel in the US had a four part mini-series of that name recently, which was a huge success I believe. So successful in fact that it was adapted to become a "regular" TV series (aired in the last months; this series is not quite so successful if I recall correctly), with a completely different cast. It is not clear to me which Evelyn is writing about, though I suspect it to be the mini-series since it would be too soon for the TV series to be shown in the UK (Sky One) already. I did not read the book so I cannot comment on her comparison between the two. In fact, I still have to watch the series (I've taped it when it

aired here last week). She talks about "the extended pilot of a new series," so I would like to know for sure which version she watched, just to satisfy my curiosity...

Marcel de Graaff
Netherlands

Evelyn Lewes replies: Sorry for the lack of clarity. I had no prior warning that this was on, so was watching it without video taping. Furthermore, the credits, as is too usual nowadays, were squashed up to allow promotion of other programmes, so I couldn't read them. I don't even remember which channel I watched it on, although as it was a Hallmark production, it seems likely that it was on Hallmark. At the time, Hallmark were not listed in our television magazine at all, their website was mute on the subject of *Dinotopia*, and the Henson Creature Shop site was not working. It is now clear that what I was watching was the mini-series, as it was repeated over Christmas on Channel 4. It is also clear that it gets very much better after the first episode, although the acting is still awful. I hold out little hope that the ensuing series will be any better.

Trashing?

Dear Editors:

Peter Garratt's letter about Evelyn Lewes's TV reviews in issue 183 makes a point that also applies to the "Mutant Popcorn" film-review column. Much as I enjoy the trashing of films, my purpose in reading reviews is to find something worth watching. So I was grateful this month that Mr Lowe found two films to praise. I appreciate the selection is often poor, but in that

case, why not include a film on video worth seeing instead?

A. Dorrance
Danville, Pennsylvania

Editor: My own impression is that Nick Lowe does enjoy many of the films he reviews – it's just that he takes an ironic tone towards most of them. As for reviewing videos or DVDs, well, Nick is not keen. He prefers the big screen.

Evelyn Lewes, Yet Again

Dear Editors:

How glad I was to receive September's *Interzone*... that was, until I realized that we had yet another column by Evelyn Lewes. The self-confessed reviewer who does not watch more than one or two episodes of a multi-season programme before writing it off as rubbish. Who admits that she does not research any of her articles and whose prose it so bad that even I have to take issue with it. So, as you can imagine, it was with some trepidation that I read her article and, blow me, she actually had something interesting to say.

The problem was how she said it. If you have a point, Evelyn, keep to the point. Do not descend into name-calling and long pointless discussions about individual episodes that you did not like of a series that you happen to like. Put your point across and back it up with concise, accurate information; add your own opinions but realize that they are only your opinions and are not gospel. Who knows one day you might actually make a decent reviewer — though I doubt it.

Ian Sewell
isewell@dircon.co.uk

A recent party in Brighton brought together several *Interzone* stalwarts.

Left to right, Tom Arden, Liz Williams, Matt Colborn, Rebecca Locksley (a visiting Australian fantasy novelist) and Molly Brown



Photo: Paul Brazier

Bare Market

Paul Di Filippo

The price of gasoline had fallen to 25 cents a gallon, and a pair of low-end Nikedidas would set you back only ten dollars. You could enjoy a three-course meal plus dessert at many of New York's better restaurants for a *prix fixe* of 15 dollars, and get change back from a 50 when purchasing a top-of-the-line Palm Pilot XXII, complete with video-conferencing features. The nation's trade deficit had been wiped out, and the global economy had just posted its sixth consecutive quarter of five-percent growth. The entire continent of Africa resembled California during the Gold Rush. New millionaires were being minted in nearly every country faster than a Martian settler could duck underground at the news of a solar flare.

We were living in boom times such as the most bullish speculator of no other era had ever dared dream of, even after consumption of a fifth consecutive bottle of Veuve Cliquot, and we owed it all to the Market.

The Market's name was Adamina Smythe. She was 19 years old, utterly untouchable, and she was sitting across from me.

Built like the ultimate offspring of some clandestine supermodel-breeding programme, the Market wore a red dress that was more suggestion than fabric. Her long thick platinum hair was pinned up by a couple of delicate and tasteful tortoiseshell clips, with a few stray tendrils wisping her brow. Her face, all subtly intersecting planes and arcs, evoked both madonnas and starlets. Her com-

plexion conjured up comparisons to exotic orchids, snow tinged by a sunset and milk tinted with cherry juice. As we waited for the arrival of our meals, the Market's delicate hands cradled her drink – straight sparkling water in a champagne flute – so sensually that I thought I might climax just from contemplating her fingers.

All I had to do tonight and over the next several days was to interview the closest thing the world of 2022 boasted to an actual, breathing goddess, for a profile in *Neuvo Vanity Fair*. And so far I had barely managed to stutter out my name, shake her warm, soft hand, and croak out my dinner order. Not an auspicious start.

I tried to recapture my experienced journalistic demeanour. But my voice still quavered as I attempted to look steadily into the Market's grass-green eyes.

"Uh, Miz Smythe—"

"Please, Glen, call me Adamina."

The Market's voice matched the rest of her, resonant as church bells and sexy as black coffee in bed. I caught a whiff of her perfume, a subtle floral scent.

"Adamina, I really look forward to, um, working with you on this feature. But are you sure my intrusions won't interfere with your other duties?"

She smiled broadly, and I had a chance to fall in love all over again with her perfect teeth. "Of course not. Face-to-face interaction utilizes only the smallest fraction of my processing power."

"So right now—"

"Right now I'm overseeing approximately one-point-seven-nine-to-the-twelfth-power simple stock transactions around the globe, and arbitrating more than one million buyouts, splits, IPOs and other equally complex procedures. Not to mention mediating billions of E-bay deals. And having no problem conversing with you."

"Incredible. And when you sleep – ?"

"A partial software persona based on me runs the show."

What could I say in the face of this nearly unbelievable declaration of stone-cold fact? Flowing through the gorgeous woman within arm's reach (and how I suddenly wanted to reach out and touch her, as if to partake of her immense and regal charisma) ran the entire planetary digital economy, without causing her any visible sign of strain or effort. No wonder talking with me took less of her resources than breathing.

All I could do was pick up my glass of wine and swallow a hefty slug. "You're sure you won't share some of this bottle? It's quite good."

The Market's manners matched her beauty. "I'm so sorry, Glen, but I simply can't indulge in alcohol or any other artificial stimulants. The perturbations in my brain chemistry – "

"Oh, right, of course. One little depressant – "

"– could trigger a Depression. Yes, that's a familiar quip."

I felt like an idiot. How often must she have heard that lame joke, and a million like it? Even granted the protective and exclusionary elite social bubble she existed in, I was certain that she must have overheard more than her share of comments treating her like some sort of freak. Along with feelings of awe and adoration, the Market had to contend with the hatred, envy and fear of the masses.

But if any such thoughtless barbs had ever hurt her, she failed to exhibit any scars or bitterness. Serene, compassionate, she apparently took no offence at my gaucherie, and the awkward moment was dispelled by the waiter's stealthy delivery of our salads.

After we fussed a bit with napkins and salt and pepper shakers, I took the opportunity of asking, "Would you mind if I started recording our conversation now?"

"Of course not. I'm eager to respond to any questions you have for me."

Eager to respond. I forced my mind away from an extremely vivid but highly unprofessional line of thinking. If the Market had ever been allowed to have a boyfriend, I knew the lucky bastard would have worn a perpetual grin. I placed my PDA midway between us, and began.

"Let's talk about your amazing childhood."

The Market's self-deprecatory laughter sent small creatures racing up and down my spine. "Oh, that hoary old media sensation! I'm certain no one even remembers it or has any interest in such old news any more."

"Are you kidding? A two-year-old found adrift on a scrap of wreckage in the mid-Atlantic by a cruise ship. And then the controversy over your upbringing – "

"Well, I suppose my early years were somewhat unusual."

"Please, Adamina, tell me your impressions of them."

The Market thoughtfully chewed a mouthful of salad,

then said, "As you described, I first came to the world's attention as a castaway. Of course, for this part of my own life I have only a few nebulous personal memories, being too young at the time to retain much. So what I'm recounting is based on my later reading and viewing of news items. One of the smaller cruise ships, en route from Bermuda to Liverpool, happened to spot a fragment of an unknown vessel floating helplessly. Onboard the makeshift raft was a single survivor of whatever grim fate had overtaken the vessel. A two-year-old girl, horribly sunburned and dehydrated. Me.

"Once rescued, I quickly regained my health after some common treatments for malnutrition and overexposure. Apparently I was in good spirits as well, regaling the ship's passengers with lots of eager childish chatter in some kind of weird pidgin tongue. But as to my name or parentage or the cause of my being adrift, I could offer no information. And no hint of my vessel's name or port of origin was ever found.

"When we docked in Liverpool, the media were waiting in droves. Authorities from the British government took me into custody and regulated all my contact with the public."

"This was when you acquired your name as well, correct?"

"Yes. At first the media tried out a dozen different tags on me. 'Waterbaby.' 'Little Mermaid.' 'Baby X.' 'Miracle Kid.' But eventually I ended up taking the family name of the official nanny they had assigned to me, a policewoman named Joan Smythe. Joan had had a son named Adam, who had died young, and so she dubbed me Adamina."

"A neat serendipity, given your future career."

The Market looked winsomely solemn. "Who knows how these earliest childhood incidents influence anyone? But even though I have only a vague recollection of her presence, I'm very grateful to Joan for being a bastion of calm and affection during this period, and I still see her regularly."

"I take it any peaceful eye of the storm did not last long."

"No. As my story spread around the world, things quickly became complicated. A lot of meanness and greed surfaced.

"What country did I belong to? Almost immediately, thousands of people from scores of nations claimed I was their missing daughter, offering more or less plausible stories to account for my mid-ocean abandonment. But DNA tests disproved all their claims, and my origin remained utterly unknown. Then various governments began to put their oars in, demanding that I, the 'miracle girl of the new millennium,' be 'repatriated' to their nation rather than to another. Their claims were all equally valid or invalid, and no decision seemed possible.

"That was when the United Nations stepped in.

"By resolution of the Security Council, I was adopted by the United Nations. Every country in the world would be my parent. I received the very first Universal Passport. And I was to be raised at the UN headquarters in Geneva.

"That's where my actual memories begin."

The waiter had cleared our salad plates away earlier, and now brought us our dinners. My steak looked like some caveman's butchery next to the Market's abstemious scatter of shrimp, and I felt awkward once again. But the Market smiled down at my choice, said, "That looks delicious," and my brutish red-meat tastes were instantly sanctified.

I resumed our conversation after a few moments. "It must have been odd, being the only child in such a setting."

"Oh, but I wasn't. The UN had a daycare centre for the children of employees and delegates, so I spent a good portion of my day with kids my own age. The only difference was that they went home, and I didn't. The *Palais des Nations* was my private castle. Whenever I could, I slipped away from my minders to roam the grounds and buildings. Did you know that after visitors are gone, the marble floors in the *Salle des Pas Perdus* offer excellent sliding when you're wearing socks?"

I laughed, picturing the Market as a young high-spirited girl cutting loose amid such reverential splendour. "No, I can't say I ever appreciated their utility for that sport. So I take it you had a happy childhood."

"Absolutely. Although I sometimes feel it ended too abruptly."

"You're referring to your precocious intellectual development."

The Market sighed like a gentle Alpine zephyr. "Yes. I was reading at a ten-year-old's level by age three. By five I spoke French, English, Spanish and Russian. German and Chinese took me a little longer to pick up. My guardians responded by accelerating my schooling so that I graduated with the equivalent of an American high-school diploma at age eleven. I enrolled in the London School of Economics and got my Ph.D four years later."

"And the Nobel in Economics?"

"I didn't receive that honour until 2020."

"At age 17."

"Correct."

The Market had recounted these accomplishments without false modesty or boastfulness, as if she had been reciting a list of the streets of Geneva. Yet I did not get the impression that she was emotionally stunted. Far from it. Her words seemed to float on a deep reservoir of humility, wisdom, empathy for others and appreciation for her own life.

"It's hard for me to imagine," I confessed, "how you must have felt to reach such a pinnacle of success at so early an age."

The Market's coral lips left a smudge on her champagne flute. "A little frustrated, actually. There seemed to be no future goals for me to aspire to in my chosen field."

"Which is why you offered yourself as the first human subject for the MIT-Caltech wetware implant."

"Indeed. It was something no one else had ever done before. And it presented interesting, ah, possibilities."

"Recovery from the operation was fairly swift, I know. You were out of the hospital within a month. But mastering the biological-cybernetic interface took a bit longer, I imagine."

"Yes. It was a whole eight weeks before I felt confident in my abilities to surf cyberspace mentally. The operat-

ing system in the implant had a few glitches that I helped to fix."

"But how did it come about that you began to focus exclusively on rationalizing the world's financial markets?"

"Well, what could have been more natural? After all, my Ph.D thesis concerned itself with maximizing marketplace efficiencies. At first I went into the digital representation of the market strictly as an observer. Even that experience was incredible. I learned so much about how the market actually functions on a quantum level. After a few of my suggestions for improvements in trading procedures were implemented manually with good results, I was allowed to start interacting directly through my wetware."

"And a year after that –"

"A year after that, for all practical purposes, I *was* the Market."

Dessert arrived, as well as an espresso for me and decaf for the Market. I watched her sip her coffee while I tried to compose my next question as delicately as I could. Finally, I decided just to be blunt.

"Weren't you afraid to insert yourself into the centre of a system that billions of people relied on for their economic survival? I mean, wouldn't you say that your actions revealed quite a bit of arrogance and hubris?"

The unflappable Market merely smiled benevolently at me. "Not at all, Glen. You see, although the various interlocked markets that existed prior to my takeover were in their primitive way a wonderful creation – perhaps the most complex and efficient human system ever invented – they were still crude and buggy tools for putting capital to work. There was minimal coordination between many of the parts of the system, and very little correlation of data or player intentions. Why, just the fact that no one thought to extend the theory of mutual funds to other investment options was shocking! And then there was the problem of overt manipulation of the markets."

"You're talking about something like the scandals of the early years of the millennium. Or the Dreamworks Recession of 2012."

"Exactly. Crooks and conmen and unprincipled CEOs were able to manipulate the market ruthlessly, inflating prices of worthless stocks and driving healthy companies out of business. Scams and insider-trading sucked the lifeblood out of the market, like parasites on a living being. Regulatory bodies like the SEC and the few artificially intelligent programs in place couldn't catch more than a fraction of these schemes. And they certainly couldn't help optimize the daily transaction flow. What was needed for optimal functioning of the marketplace was a single arbiter and facilitator, a judge and negotiator, a coordinator and enforcer. That role required a human mind trained in the subtlety of the market and in human motivations. A mind backed up by access to many additional teraflops of processing power. A unique mind belonging to a human who had no attachments or allegiances to any family or nation. And my mind was the only one that fit the bill. There was no arrogance or hubris involved. Just a recognition that I had found the one all-important task I was destined to perform."

I reached for my PDA and shut off its recording function. I found myself somewhat shaken by our conversation. Perhaps finishing a whole bottle of wine on my own had contributed to my discomfort. The Market spoke from such an Olympian perspective that I felt buglike in comparison. But paradoxically, her erotic allure that I had been attempting to deny and ignore all evening had only swelled in power.

"Well, Adamina, thank you for being so forthcoming. I feel we're off to a good start. I'll see you tomorrow morning at ten, as we planned?"

"Certainly. The photoshoot should be fun."

With an elegant demand for our attention, the waiter deftly slid the leather-jacketed bill onto the table. I reached for it, saying, "We'll let the magazine take care of this."

The gesture was foolish, but I made it anyway. By universal agreement, the Market was paid a salary pegged to the performance of her virtual counterpart and skimmed from every participating country. In 16 months she had leapt onto the *Forbes* 1000, just below the guy who owned the patents to the tabletop sono-fusion powerplant just going into production.

"Of course," said the Market, "*Nuevo Vanity Fair* can well afford it."

I shivered a bit, knowing that the Market's words were not merely a perfunctory courtesy.

She was certainly accessing *NVF*'s balance sheets as we spoke.

The Market killed in a bikini.

The tiny scraps of fabric (displaying fragmented surface animations of their designer's latest Paris runway show) revealed nearly all of the glorious body I had fantasized about at dinner last night. As the photographer – a short stocky fellow with longish blonde hair and an annoying bark of a voice – directed the Market to assume various fairly demure showgirl poses, I had to turn away to hide my erection.

The shoot had started innocently enough, with the Market modelling various gowns and casual outfits. Adamina Smythe exhibited a natural grace and self-possession. She let the stylists and makeup techs interminably fuss around her without growing irritable or weary. She took direction from the photographer well, and didn't wilt under the hot lights. Even granting that she had been at the centre of incredible media attention during the past 17 years, her performance was remarkable.

Only at one point had the Market called a halt to the proceedings. After blinking rapidly for several seconds, she said, "We need to stop now for a minute or so, please."

Solicitous as a nursemaid, I rushed up to her side with a bottle of water. "Is everything all right? Are you getting tired? Do you have a headache?"

"No. It's just that I've just been attacked by a really bad virus. I need to concentrate."

The Market retreated to the dressing room, and everyone took a break for coffee or snacks or a smoke.

Despite the world's growing widespread prosperity, a few international dissidents to the new order still skulked beneath the burnished woodwork, opposed to the

Market for a variety of ideological reasons. The 1929'ers, the Anti-Souk League, the New Barterians, the Alan Greenspammers— With the reduction in importance of physical trading establishments like Wall Street and the London, Hong Kong, Moscow, Beijing, Rio and Tokyo exchanges, these terrorists had fallen back on virtual attacks, attempting to disrupt the portions of cyberspace that the Market inhabited. Luckily, the Market's bodily safety – like that of any other citizen – was guaranteed by the various Homeland Security organizations of whatever country she happened to be residing in, without resort to such obsolete safeguards as special squads of bodyguards.

And now, apparently, hidden hackers had launched one of their trademark virtual attacks.

I dithered nervously while the Market did whatever she had to do to combat this threat. I called my editor, Zulma Soares, to fill her in on my progress, and learned that she had allotted another five pages to my article, based on a recent poll of the Market's popularity. Great. More pressure.

Eventually the Market reappeared, apparently unruffled by her brush with disaster. "The virus is safely partitioned now. My support staff are analyzing it to guard against any such future incursions. We can resume."

Shortly after that, the Market made another trip to the dressing room, emerging in her swimsuit.

That was when I nearly lost it. Up till then, I had managed to keep my lust for the Market somewhat hidden and in check. Berating myself for unprofessionalism and idiotic, impossible daydreams, I left the room, determined to stay outside until my excitement grew less visible.

The physical evidence of my adolescent delusions had just vanished when the Market herself tapped me on the shoulder. She wore loose linen pants, a white blouse with three-quarter sleeves that flounced at their edges, and sandals. A straw hat sloped back atop her thick fall of unrestrained silvery hair.

"Glen, is everything okay?"

"Fine, fine, I just had to, uh, attend to a call of nature."

"How did you think the photo session went?"

"Perfect. They'll use one of the swimsuit shots on the cover, you know. Does that bother you?"

"Why should it?"

"You don't mind exposing yourself like that to millions of strangers?"

"No, of course not. It's just my body, after all. Everyone's got one. But I really don't understand people's interest in such things. I'm already such an intimate part of their lives, it seems almost redundant for them to be fascinated by what I look like."

"That – that is almost a nonhuman attitude."

There it was. I had said one of the things that I had been holding back from saying. But there was no avoiding the topic now, so I pressed ahead in somewhat contentious adversarial reporter mode.

"Do you feel truly human, Adamina, after all your modifications? Did you ever think that possibly you're some sort of alien, planted among us?"

Completely unfazed, the Market just shrugged. "This

is something I've thought about for a long time, Glen. But how would I know whether I feel human or not? I know what my interior life is like, but how do I decide whether my mental states are comparable to the human norm? How do any of us know we feel the same emotions others feel, or think the same way? It's like seeing colour. When I say something's red, and you agree, are we really seeing the same colour? You just can't know. As for literally being an alien or some kind of spontaneous or engineered mutant, of course I've thought about the possibility. My strange origin after all might be a clever charade, a means of inserting me into human society for some nefarious purpose. But all I can tell you is that every medical test so far reveals me to be completely human. And I don't have any hidden allegiances to the Tentacled Flesh Eaters from Mizar Five."

The Market laughed, and I did too, out of relief. "Okay, then, I'm glad that awkward bit's out of the way. I wouldn't have been much of a reporter if I didn't ask, and I hope you'll excuse my impertinence."

"You're excused. Now, it's a beautiful day out there, and I haven't been in New York in the past six months. Let's walk around a little and then grab some lunch."

Out on the sidewalk, I spontaneously offered the Market my hand. Her fingers grazed mine briefly, imparting a little friendly pressure before she withdrew them, but all my doubts about her humanity vanished.

Over the next several days I was not out of the Market's company for more than the regular hours devoted to our separate sleeping. Much of that time we spent in public places, and I was startled by the reactions of the average people who recognized her. That walk after the photo shoot had first introduced me to her adoring fans.

Every few feet we moved down the Manhattan sidewalks people stopped the Market, just to say hello or smile wordlessly or thank her or ask for her autograph. Men and women of all ages and classes responded equally to her, although of course among the males there was that extra component of slack-jawed sexual attraction. I found myself getting jealous of the guys, until I forced myself to remember that I had no particular claim on the Market's attention.

Nor did any man.

People with children made a big point of explaining to their kids who the Market was and what she did and how she was responsible for all the good things this youngest generation enjoyed as unquestioned appurtenances to their privileged lives. The kids reacted with wide-eyed admiration and reverence.

After a while, I felt like I was second-in-command to the leader of some cult out for a stroll among the faithful. To witness any other person I had ever met as the focus of such adoration would have struck me as repugnant. I would have labelled the object of all this reverence – CEO or famous politician, Bollywood starlet or world-class scientist, religious leader or famed solar-sail racer – as an insufferable egotist, soaking up the ignorant worship of the masses. But something about the Market's pristine demeanour negated any such harsh judgment. She was

just so gracious and selfless, so transparent and good-hearted that the effusive praise did not bloat her, but instead seemed to pass through her. She was a two-way conduit for power from above and gratitude from below.

One evening I told her about all these thoughts, and she just smiled mysteriously and said, "Giving and receiving are just two sides of the same coin."

Somehow this sentiment lost its triteness coming from the Market's lips.

The Market and I continued our professional dialogue in any number of locations and circumstances. I learned more than I ever wanted to know about the intricacies of the world's economy. If I never heard the words "arbitrage," "debenture," "munis," or "futures" again, it would be too soon. Truth to tell, the Market could be kind of a drone sometimes.

The Market had a healthy appetite and a moderate taste for luxury, and I ate more fancy meals than I usually indulge in. At the end of a week, I was having trouble bonding the stik-tite closures on my pants. Finally, however, we began to run out of things to talk about, and my deadline was imminent. Zulma was pressing me to see a first draft of the piece, so she could start thinking about pull-quotes. But I still hadn't broached my second awkward question on an essential topic – a topic that Zulma had specifically enjoined me to tackle.

I decided at last to confront the Market over lunch on what would be the final day of our time together.

After the waiter had taken our orders, I asked, "Tell me, Adamina, do you ever think about sex?"

The Market did not respond immediately. And was that a faint blush suffusing her cheeks?

"Oh, I'm sorry, Glen. Some drudgester just posted news of a big water-strike on Mars and the NASDAQ went through the ceiling. What was that question again?"

The NASDAQ and Dow Jones functioned like the Market's temperature or EKG. I would guess that such a spike might represent a fever or a case of heart arrhythmia in a mere mortal. For the first time it occurred to me that the unverifiable demands her job made on the Market's attention could also serve as a convenient excuse not to hear something. But I was not to be rebuffed.

"I asked about your feelings on sex. Specifically, how does it feel to be a virgin at your age, with no prospect of ever experiencing normal physical love?"

"What do you want me to say, Glen? That the situation doesn't bother me? I told you I was physiologically human in all respects. But I simply can't indulge in sex. The hormonal and neural and endocrinal turmoil that intercourse involves would wreak havoc with my wetware. My connection with the market – well, as the experts love to say, 'Results would be unpredictable.' So do I obsess about this lack or limitation in my life until I'm miserable? Or do I just accept it as part of who I am, and concentrate on what I do best and on all the rewards it brings to me and the rest of the world? It's not so unusual, is it? After all, I wouldn't be the first person to choose celibacy as an aid to a higher goal, would I?"

I felt like a louse, and decided to cut the thread short. "Fair enough, Adamina. I'm sure you realize that our

readers would have felt cheated if we hadn't addressed this aspect of your life."

"I understand. But I'd prefer to talk about something else now, Glen."

So we did.

As we were leaving the restaurant, a young woman rushed up to us. The stranger threw her arms about the Market and spontaneously planted a kiss on the Market's cheek.

The Market shied back in a manner not typical of her usual generosity toward such impulsive displays, and I knew my insensitive probing must have disturbed her usual composure.

Sometimes my job made me feel like shit.

But nothing professionally had ever prepared me for what came next.

Of course everyone now knows that the woman who kissed the Market was a member of the Counterfeiters' Army, whose *nom de guerre* was Penny Candy, and that her kiss was laced with a potent designer drug engineered to function on contact as a general emotional disinhibitor. Having failed to disrupt the Market through attacks on her cyberspace extensions, this group of malcontents had hit upon the strategy of sabotaging her implanted wetware.

And quite a successful strategy it proved to be.

I knocked on the door to the Market's hotel room, intending to say goodbye, and offer thanks for her co-operation as an interview subject. Like some timorous teenage suitor, I carried a box of Godiva chocolates and a small hair clip she had admired once while window-shopping with me.

What could you actually buy the woman who had everything? Who *was* everything?

The door jerked open and I faced the Market. Her hair was in disarray, with tendrils plastered to her sweaty face. Her shirt was half-unbuttoned, and she was barefoot. Her usual perfume was overlain with a musky reek.

She put the back of her hand up to her brow. "Oh, Glen, it's you – What is it?"

"I just wanted to come in to say goodbye. But if this is a bad time –"

"Yes. I mean, no, it's not. Come in."

I took a seat, expecting the Market to do likewise. But she instead paced up and down the room, talking unceasingly, her words on the edge of sense and craziness.

I should have left then. I half suspected something bad was about to happen. If I had just stood up and exited, I would never have played such a pivotal role in the Orgasmic Meltdown of 2022.

But then I knew subconsciously that some other man surely would have taken my place.

And that was a prospect I couldn't tolerate. Along with my infatuation with the Market, jealousy compelled me to stay.

And in the end, both Penny Candy and I were equally complicit in the Market's downfall.

"Glen, I just don't know how to feel about anything any more. Suddenly everything looks different to me. This busy

world, all the people eager for more, more, more – Have I wasted my life? What was I thinking? Who appointed me God? And all these numbers! They're driving me insane! There must be more to life than getting and spending. Money, money, money! It's in my bloodstream, Glen. It's in my *blood*! I'm burning up!"

"Adamina, calm down. I'm sorry if anything I said caused you to feel this way. Here, let me get you a glass of water."

I stood up and moved toward a carafe on a sideboard.

Halfway there, the Market hurled herself at me.

I took the shock of her impact and remained standing. She hopped up and wrapped her arms and legs around me. Her mouth was all over my face and neck. I cupped her haunches and staggered backward. The edge of the couch caught me behind the knees and we tumbled onto it.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Our lovemaking left a precise trail of wreckage across the global economy. It was as if we were two giants fucking atop a village, crushing houses and barns, livestock and citizens heedlessly.

The first touch of our tongues sent sizable tremors through the market. Prices of individual stocks began to oscillate senselessly, without reference to actual values or trades. Around the world, investors started to panic. Buy and sell orders flooded into the market, but were ignored or interpreted incorrectly by the Market's sex-addled brain. But the worst was yet to come.

My hands on the Market's breasts bankrupted hundreds of companies. Her thrashing trashed whole fiscal empires. When I went down on her, entire nations became paper paupers. When I broke her hymen and penetrated her as deeply as I could, Mars and the Moon fell entirely out of the solar system's financial net.

When the Market and I climaxed together, her screams signalled the complete implosion of the planetary marketplace.

We lay panting amidst the smouldering ruins of the world's commerce. I estimated we had about 60 seconds of post-coital solitude before the world began hammering on the door.

I overestimated the peaceful interlude by ten seconds.

Well, in short order the boffins rebooted the world's economy from that morning's backups, but repercussions from our sex remained. Approximately half a million people worldwide had committed suicide, mistaking the Market's convulsions for actual tragic outcomes affecting their fortunes. A dozen small wars had begun, and millions of companies – in the hair-trigger fashion so typical of the modern fail-safe economy – had cancelled orders, dumped inventory and redirected their marketing schemes in non-recoverable ways.

After Adamina's wetware implant was removed, experts cast about for another person to take on the burden of being the Market. But they could find no one else who possessed Adamina's combination of skills and character and statelessness. So the market today stumbles along using Adamina's partial software persona to run the show. It functions better than the 20th-century market, but it's not as good as the Market. Filling the tank

of your car costs about a dollar extra now. You don't get dessert with your *prix fixe* meal. And the new model Palm Pilot doesn't feature so much free software. But somehow we survive.

As for me, things are just getting to the point where I can show my face in public without provoking catcalls or sniggers or assaults or congratulatory slaps on the back from macho jerks. My career as a journalist was pretty much shot the moment I became a subject rather than a reporter. So I spend most of my time in my study, working on a novel. The subject matter's not my experiences with the Market. I wanted to steer clear of autobiography. But the fact that I won't spill any dirt and that my 15 minutes of infamy is fading means that I haven't had any bites from any publisher yet. But money's not a problem.

Adamina had banked the majority of her pay as the Market.

And it's all safely invested now in real estate.

Paul Di Filippo appeared in the last issue of *Interzone*, number 184, writing "Philip Lawson" in collaboration with Michael Bishop. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and his most recent solo stories here were "Singing Each to Each" (IZ 155), "Return to Cockaigne" (IZ 163), "Babylon Sisters" (IZ 168) and "What Goes Up a Chimney? Smoke!" (IZ 177). His latest books are the novel *A Mouthful of Tongues: Her Totipotent Tropicandia*, the novella *A Year in the Linear City*, and the collection *Babylon Sisters and Other Posthumans* – all published in 2002.

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Five years later, I met Trish again, quite by chance, in a gay pub in south London. She was working behind the bar.

"Not the sort of place I'd expect to bump into you, Ken," she said.

I was still getting over the shock of seeing her. She hadn't changed a bit. Even her clothes were the same – sort of smart-hippy. I felt faint. It was a minute or so before I could reclaim control of my powers of speech. "Me? I'm just here for a pick-up."

Trish giggled. She arched her black eyebrows and popped her green eyes.

"I mean, I'm a minicab driver now. AB Cars. Supposed to pick up a fare, name of Delores."

Trish nodded, finished polishing a wine glass, then put it down and picked up her coat off a bar stool. "That's me," she said. "Ready to roll."

"I – I see. You're married, are you?" She'd been Trish Renton when I knew her.

"No," she said, getting into her coat. She didn't elaborate.

"Right. OK. Well, I'm just parked a couple of doors down." My hand shook as I held the door open for her. It couldn't really be her, could it? "But it's still Trish, is it? You haven't changed your first name?"

Trish turned and smiled. "You can call me Trish," she said. "Tell me about your new job, Ken. Are you happy there? Do they treat you well?"

Cold sweat seeped into my clothes, and for a moment I honestly thought about legging it – leaving the cab where it was, just doing a runner, disappearing into the night. But in the end, I didn't have the guts for it. I mean, supposing she got angry with me?

These days, so I'm told, call centres aren't such bad places to work – or not all of them, anyway. Demand for labour is high, staff retention is low, so they have to treat their employees more-or-less like human beings. And anyway, most of the centres are unionized now. But when Trish and I worked for TexTel, the industry was only just beginning to grow in the UK, and things were very different.

It was an American company, and it had rules and regulations about everything. I mean, *everything*. If you needed a pee, you had to put your hand up in the air, just like in infant school, and wait for permission. My first

By Hand or by Brain

Mat Coward

week there, the bloke sitting next to me was sacked for going to the lavatory without leave; he had a stomach bug, diarrhoea, but that didn't make any difference. In fact, he was sacked for two reasons: failure to seek permission for a toilet break, and defecating on duty. Urination during working hours was allowed, provided you didn't go too often – and even then, every visit was timed by a supervisor with a stopwatch – but if you insisted on crapping, you were expected to do it on your own time. You think I'm exaggerating, don't you? Well, maybe you've got a *nice* job. Good luck to you.

It was a huge barn of a place, with 300 employees, stretched out in long rows. Talking to colleagues was forbidden. Eating or drinking or smoking at your work station was forbidden. Breathing wasn't actually forbidden, but if they could have found a way to stop us breathing *and* keep us working, they'd have done it. Not that there was much time to breathe; the incoming call traffic was relentless, at all hours of the day or night.

The calls we answered were from bank customers who were having problems with their plastic. We had precisely 285 seconds to complete each call – at the end of the week, anyone who'd consistently failed to meet that target was dismissed.

It was the sort of job you only do when you're so desperate, you think Hell is a holiday destination.

Trish joined the happy band during my second week there; she took the vacant seat next to mine.

The moment I saw her, I decided that she was worth risking the wrath of TexTel for. Waiting until I was pretty sure our supervisor wasn't watching, I leaned over to Trish's station and whispered: "Some of us go for a curry after work. You fancy it?"

She looked up at me, smiled, and nodded.

She was still smiling, to my great relief, even after we'd arrived at the curry house, and I'd confessed that "some of us go for a curry" had been a slight exaggeration. In fact, I sometimes went for a curry. TexTel discouraged its staff from fraternizing, both by its rules and because the general atmosphere of the place just wasn't conducive to gossiping around the coffee machine. Apart from anything else, there was no coffee machine.

"Well," she said. "Aren't you the crafty one?" She didn't sound annoyed. Maybe my luck was turning, I thought.

About time, if so.

Her accent was vaguely Irish – except that sometimes, it wasn't. In the same way, she sometimes seemed very young... and sometimes she didn't. The only constants were her black hair, her green eyes, and that she was gorgeous.

Of course, I tried to find out about her: where exactly she was from, where she lived now, and – though not in so many words – how old she was. She wasn't what you'd call forthcoming.

"Around and about," she said. "I've moved around a lot, over the years." And that was as much as she was telling. Fair enough; people who worked jobs like that often had a story, and they weren't usually the kind you wanted to hear.

On her second day at the call mill, Trish witnessed her first summary dismissal.

I looked up from my screen, having heard a noise above all the usual noises of the place. Trish looked up at the same moment, and lifted her eyebrows to me. I shrugged back. Then I heard it again. It was the trill of a mobile phone, coming from a couple of rows behind us.

I turned round just in time to see a young Indian woman drop a mobile onto her worktop and clamp both her hands over her mouth. Her eye makeup began to melt, and run down her cheeks.

Even as we watched, Trish and I kept working, kept up the urgent patter with our callers, kept tapping at the keyboard and grinding our teeth while we waited for the screens to change.

"Your postcode, please?"

"As a further ID check, can you give me your mother's maiden name, please?"

But once it became obvious that the woman behind us was in real distress – not just reacting to a rude caller, say, or the realization that she'd spent 20 seconds too long on her last five calls – Trish tore off her own headset, without hesitation, and ran the few paces over to the crying woman's station.

Beautiful *and* brave, I thought. I could get serious about a woman like that.

With some hesitation – because I'm no more brave than I am beautiful – I terminated my current call as soon as I reasonably could, and walked slowly over to join Trish, who had an arm around... well, around whatever her name was. I never did find out.

"My son's been taken ill," the nameless woman gasped, her sobs getting louder. "That was the school – oh God, my son's in hospital!"

"You!" The piercing New York squawk of Ruth Delaney, Plant Manager, made all around her flinch – actually, visibly flinch, as if prodded with an electric cattle drive. She scared me, truly scared me, and I'm not generally the scared type. Or I wasn't, anyway, back then.

Trish didn't flinch. I noticed that, even the sobbing girl noticed that, and you can bet your life Ruthless Ruth noticed it. "What are you doing away from your station without permission?"

Trish looked Ruth up and down – from the expensive

hair-do, down past the jacket and skirt that fitted her like a suit of armour – and was quite obviously not greatly taken by what she saw.

"Helping a colleague," she said.

"Get back to your station, lady. You have had your first and final warning."

Trish took a linen handkerchief from her blouse pocket, and gently wiped away the worst of the spoiled makeup from the crying woman's face. Only then, and without even looking at the plant manager, did she walk back to her place.

I gave her a surreptitious thumbs-up. (I'd returned to my place the moment Ruth appeared on the scene).

As we worked our calls, on mental auto-pilot, we heard the drama conclude behind us. The Indian woman explained that she had to go – her son was sick, the school had phoned, he'd been taken to hospital, she had to go.

"Well, if you have to go," said Ruth, "you have to go."

There was a short, incredulous pause – not only from the crying woman, but from all of us in earshot – and then: "Thank you! Oh, God, thank you! I –"

"Your dismissal," said Ruth, "will be backdated to the end of last week. Your earnings this week are forfeited for cause: deserting your post, and carrying a mobile phone while on duty."

We heard the high heels clip-clip away. When I dared to turn around, the crying woman had gone.

Trish leaned over to me. "That Ruth," she said, covering her receiver with her hand, "is a real witch."

By nine o'clock that evening, sitting in an underpopulated, overheated pub a couple of Tube stops away from the call mill, I still wasn't feeling any better about the afternoon's events. Worse, if anything.

Guilt, we call it these days, but whatever you call it – and however far from the caves humans evolve – biology is still biology. A man who acts out of fear, or fails to act, ends up doubling his fear.

"The thing is," I told Trish, as she sipped at her oily, lukewarm white wine, "that's not how I was brought up. I mean, my parents aren't exactly radicals, but they taught me certain values. Like, you stand up to bullies. You know? You don't turn a blind eye to injustice." I took a swig of bottled beer. "And that if you let the bosses shaft your workmates today, then tomorrow it'll be you they're shafting."

"I'm not sure what you could have done," said Trish. "Any of us could have done."

I shrugged. "That's true, but I'm not sure it's the point. If you don't even try, you're – well, you're not human, are you? You're cattle."

"All right, then." She put her elbows on the grubby table, somehow avoiding the sticky patches, and cupped her chin in her hands. "So what are we going to do?"

It felt good to have an ally. Especially one I fancied as much as I fancied Trish. At the same time, it was a little unnerving: after all, if you're on your own, no one can reasonably expect you to fight the good fight. But once there's two of you... well, obligations arise. So whatever I said next – I would have to mean it.

"What that place needs," I said, "is a union."

"Didn't you tell me TexTel sack anyone who joins a union?"

"Sure. But if enough of us join all at once..."

I stopped speaking when I realized I'd lost Trish's attention. She was still looking at me, still had her elbows a few inches from my forearms on the pub table. She was still wearing a little crinkly smile around the corners of her lips, as her face tilted in towards mine. But the animation had gone from her expression. I had the distinct and sudden impression that she was disappointed with me – as if I'd failed some sort of test.

"You don't agree?" I asked.

"Oh sure, Ken, sure. You're probably right." She straightened up in her chair, and drained her glass. Clearly, our evening was at an end.

"And you're with me? You'll help me try to organize a union?"

"Sure," said Trish, slipping her arms into her overcoat sleeves.

I couldn't let it go. "But...?"

"No, no buts. I'm in. I just wonder – well, when you're dealing with an old witch like Ruth, I wonder whether a union is enough."

As we left the pub and said goodnight outside the Tube station, I remember thinking: *That's the second time she's called Ruth a witch.* Not a word you hear women use much, these days.

There was a period of about an hour, a week after that conversation in the pub, when I really thought it was all going to work out, when everything seemed to be going just fine.

The guy from the union obviously knew his stuff, and was clearly used to holding clandestine meetings with frightened employees. He was about my age, bit older maybe. Prematurely grey hair, big shoulders, half-moon spectacles – a firm handshake and an easy smile. His name was John. There was something very reassuring about him: he didn't tell us that all our problems would end the moment we signed on his dotted line. On the contrary, he entertained us with war stories about other workers in other call centres, or similar places, who'd taken on big companies. Some of the people in his stories won, and some of them lost.

He didn't try to sell us the union, and he didn't try to put us off it, either. He just laid out the facts, and promised us one hundred per cent backing if we decided to go ahead. And every now and then, he paused to shovel some dahl into his mouth with a piece of naan bread, and exclaim over its excellence.

Trish and I hadn't spoken to anyone else about our meeting; obviously we'd have to sooner or later, but for now we were only testing the waters. Or rather, I was testing the waters – Trish said very little. Trish ate very little. Trish, it has to be said, looked pretty bored by the whole business.

Until, without warning, a voice from behind my chair said: "This looks nice. Mind if I join in?" The fork that was half way to my mouth froze. How had she found us?

We were miles from the call centre, the other side of town. This could only be some kind of incredible coincidence.

Trish's face lit up. Her posture lifted, her eyes burned, her smile glowed. "Ruth! Please, pull up a chair. You'll have some wine? I'll get another glass." She signalled to the waiter.

Ruth sat down. She didn't so much as glance at me – or Trish. She had eyes only for John. They weren't loving eyes. "I don't think I know you, sir?"

John's calm smile smoothed some of the tension from my rigid shoulders. Well, sure, he'd be used to handling situations like this. He'd have some smooth cover story all mapped out and ready to use. Maybe he'd be my cousin, or Trish's brother-in-law, or...

"John Golding is an organizer with the communications union," said Trish. "Ruth Delaney is the plant manager at TexTel. Ruth – John. John – Ruth. Ruth: wine?" And her smile broadened. John's smile died. Mine had never been born.

"I'll take a little wine, yes," said Ruth, accepting a glass from the waiter. "And maybe a few poppadoms. We'll make an evening of it, what do you say?"

I didn't say anything. I eventually put my fork down, and that was about all I could manage. Trish, smiling ever more extravagantly, and even beginning to giggle slightly – little hiccup giggles – called the waiter back and asked him for a plate of mixed poppadoms, spicy and plain.

"Well," John said, recovering quickly. "Perhaps this informal setting would be a good place to ask you, Ms Delaney, as a matter of first impressions, how you feel about opening discussions with the union?"

"On behalf of whom?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your union does not have any members at TexTel. What is there to discuss?"

"I see," said John, carefully moving his wine glass and his plate to one side. Clearing the space in front of him for battle. "Well, these two people here are your employees, as you know, and they have expressed an interest –"

Ruth made her fingers into little binoculars, and used them to search the restaurant. It was childish, sure, but it was intimidating too. When someone acts that daft in such a situation you can bet they're either supremely confident, or very stupid. I didn't think Ruth was stupid.

"I see no TexTel employees in this dump," she said. "Two *ex*-employees, yes, but no one who is currently employed by my company."

I finally spoke. "Oh, shit," I said. It wasn't much, but at least it proved my throat hadn't healed over. I glanced across at Trish, expecting to share a visual sigh of commiseration with her. After all, we were both unemployed as of now. Or as of the previous Friday, knowing TexTel.

Trish's face was alive with joy. She had both her hands clamped between her knees, like an excited little girl trying not to pee. She looked lovely; the whole effect was, I have to admit, very sexy. But... inappropriate, or *what*? The poppadoms arrived.

"You're saying you're going to sack Trish and Ken? For

wanting to join a union? That seems a little dictatorial, Ms Delaney.”

“I’m saying I’ve already sacked them, sonny.” She nibbled on a poppadom. Elegantly; no crumbs. “My dictatorial whims are invariably retrospective, as these two ex-employees, whose names I don’t recall, will no doubt tell you.”

“Trish,” said Trish, beaming, extending her hand over the remains of the meal. “My name’s Trish.”

Still without looking at her, let alone at me, Ruth shook Trish’s hand, very briefly and neatly. I don’t think she even knew she was doing it; pure reflex. She didn’t take her eyes off John, and I thought I knew why: the two of us, employees or ex-employees, we weren’t worth a moment of her attention or a drop of her spit. But a determined union man could, if he put his mind to it, conceivably make trouble. Tonight’s performance was aimed at making sure he got the message: *Stay away, boy, you’ll break your teeth if you try to take a bite out of me.*

It was only of academic interest to me now, of course – I’d been sacked, I wouldn’t need to worry about paying union dues for a while – but even so I was impressed by John’s refusal to eat her subtext. I suppose you don’t get a job like his by being a wimp.

“I have to warn you, that in this country – ”

“In this country,” Ruth interrupted, with a dismissive wave of her hand, “in *any* country, actions speak and words just whistle. I’ve sacked them. They’re history. Now if you want to sue me, *John*, if you want to picket me, if you want to take me to one of your dinky little tribunals – fine, see where it gets you. And just for the record, *John*, I’ll do the same to the rest of your subversive crew, however many of them you think you’ve managed to recruit behind my back.”

John said nothing, absolutely nothing. I could have sworn his face gave nothing away, but then I wasn’t used to this kind of power play. Ruth was.

“Thank you!” she said, laughing and clapping her hands. “There *are* no more – only these two. That’s all I wanted to know.” She took a triumphant bite of her poppadom, and started to bleed.

At first I thought it was a nosebleed, or maybe that she’d cut her mouth. But it couldn’t be that: the blood wasn’t flowing, it was *exuding*. Evenly, all across her face, blood was oozing out of her pores like sweat. Not a lot of blood – not enough to splash or trickle – but enough so that within seconds her entire face was as red as a tomato.

“Your – your face is bleeding,” said John. He handed her a linen napkin.

Ruth wiped at her face with the napkin, and looked at the evidence. “What the hell...”

I helped Ruth back into her seat. Waiters converged on us. John got out his mobile phone and called an ambulance. Trish smiled, and poured herself another glass of wine.

When the paramedics had taken Ruth away, and the restaurant manager had rushed us through the process of paying our bill, John said: “What on earth was all that? That woman was sweating blood.”

Trish finished off the last poppadom in two big bites.

“Nothing to worry about, just an allergic reaction. Some people are like that with spicy food.”

Trish and I began picketing the TexTel plant the following Monday, after our dismissals had been made formal. It was a lonely sort of picket line – just the two of us, with our “Official Strike – Do Not Cross” posters, and our “Steward” armbands. John came along for a couple of hours first thing, to show that the might of the national union was behind us, but it wasn’t exactly the storming of the Winter Palace.

Of course, it was raining.

We deliberately turned up after the morning shift had already clocked on; no point in staging a confrontation that we couldn’t possibly win. If we were going to bring out the other TexTel slaves it was going to have to be by example, not blockade.

Ruth emerged from the building at around 10.30, to ask if we’d like a cup of tea. I was so damn cold by then that I almost said *Yes, please*, until I caught the sarcasm in her eyes. The eyes were about all you could see of Ruth’s face; the rest was bandaged.

“Go home now, forget about all this crap, and the company won’t take any further action. Hey, I’ll even write you a decent reference.”

She spoke to me – only to me. She acted as if Trish wasn’t even there, until Trish stuck out her hand, just like she had in the restaurant, and said “Hi there, my name’s Trish. Pleased to meet you.”

Ruth stuck her own hands deep into her pockets. “You,” she said. “I always knew you were trouble, right from the first time I saw you.”

Trish laughed. “No you didn’t. Worse luck for you.”

The plant manager, her hands still firmly in her pockets, marched back into her plant without another word.

“Evil old witch,” said Trish.

“Bitch?”

“Witch.”

“That seems to be a favourite word of yours,” I said.

“Only where it’s appropriate.” Trish held up her placard to shield me from the wind while I lit a cigarette. One good thing about being on strike, you can smoke when you want. “Ken: what do you think happened in that curry house?”

I inhaled, exhaled, wondered why I didn’t want to answer. I’d been having nightmares about Ruth’s bleeding face. “Allergy, you said.”

“Sure, but you’re not an idiot. You didn’t believe me.”

I wished something would happen to distract us. I didn’t want to discuss this. But after a long, hopeless pause, I sighed and said: “OK. What, then?”

Trish put a hand on my shoulder, and swept my face with those green eyes. “My parents were like yours, Ken. Ordinary people, but they taught me certain values. And where I grew up, you have to know about things like this.”

“Things like what?”

She shrugged, hooked a strand of windblown hair out of her face. “Basic first aid, really. That’s all it is.”

“I’m not with you. First aid?” I threw my cigarette away, not even half-smoked.

"Against witchcraft," she said. "It was nothing fancy. When we shook hands in the restaurant, Ruth tried to do me harm, so I simply mirrored her own spell back at her. In my village, any ten-year-old knows enough to do that."

Oh, great. I was striking for the right to return to a job I hated, it was raining, there were only two of us on the picket line, and one of us was bonkers. *Welcome to the working week.*

"Ruth's a witch?" I said. "And you bounced her spell back at her, which made her face bleed?"

Trish bit her lip, and nodded. She looked so sexy.

I tried a manly chuckle. It fell flat on its face, but at least I tried. "I don't think there are any witches in London," I said.

"Sure, there are witches everywhere." She was smiling, but I was beginning to realize with Trish that just because she was smiling didn't mean she was joking.

We spent four days on that line, and perverse as it sounds they were amongst the best days of my life.

Being with Trish was part of it. OK, so she was slightly crazy but – hell, there are worse things a person can be than slightly crazy. She was beautiful, and that counts for a lot in this world. I'm not saying it should, but we all know it does.

More than that, though, it was as if the time I spent standing in the rain outside the call centre was a kind of refresher course in human decency. And God knows, I needed that.

The first afternoon, a guy driving a Post Office van refused to cross our picket line. I could hardly believe it. I mean, yeah, that's what pickets do – stop people crossing. In theory. But actually *doing* it... well, it felt great. "Never crossed a line in my life, pal," he told me. "Don't plan to start now."

My lesson in sheer courage came the next morning, when five more TexTel workers joined the strike. One of them was a harried-looking Chinese woman, called Yo, or something that sounded like that. She told us about her two invalid brothers, how they depended on her wage alone to keep them alive.

"They can't claim benefits?" I asked. "Maybe the union could –"

She shook her head. "No." I didn't pursue the question.

I knew this wasn't what union stewards were supposed to do, but I couldn't help hinting to Yo that if she decided to go back to work, none of us would think any less of her. She shook her head again. "If you let them treat you like dirt, you are dirt."

First thing next morning, immigration cops came and arrested her. She was an illegal; not too hard to guess who'd tipped them off. "I'm glad I joined you," she said, as they took her away.

I was raging. "What the *fuck* is the point of that? Hard-working, law-abiding woman, all she wants to do is take care of her family..." I looked up at the TexTel building, and saw a bandaged face staring back at me. "You evil old witch!" I screamed.

Trish kissed me, very lightly, on the cheek. "Told you."

Our big break came on the fourth day, Thursday. In the middle of the afternoon, TexTel suffered a major failure of its telephone systems. The first we knew about it was when an engineer's van eased to a halt a couple of yards from my outstretched hand.

The driver leaned out and read my placard. "This an official strike?"

"Communications workers," I said. "We were sacked for joining the union."

"Bastards," he said. "Let them fix their own sodding phones." The van reversed back the way it had come, and disappeared.

Our little band of rebels let out a cheer the size of a football stadium. *That one's for Yo*, I muttered.

Twenty minutes later, the repair van reappeared, but only long enough to unload a big sack full of greasy burgers and little plastic cups of pissy coffee. "Don't let the bastards grind you down," the driver instructed us. We assured him we wouldn't. That was the best meal I ever ate in my life.

I'd nowhere near finished digesting it when our strike reached its awful climax.

As far as TexTel were concerned, half a dozen losers loitering on a raggedy picket line was an annoyance. Not being able to get their phones mended was a disaster.

Less than an hour after the repair van had vanished, another vehicle arrived on the plot. A dark, heavy van, the sort security firms use to transport wages. It pulled up at the far end of the service road, and sat with its engine idling. The back doors opened, and eight large men, wearing leathers and visored helmets, got out and leaned against the sides of the van.

"Jesus," I said. "Heavies."

"That's right," said Ruth, standing so close behind me that her chin was almost on my shoulder. "We're going to settle this the old-fashioned way."

"There are laws –" I began.

"So? Call the cops. By the time they get here, it'll all be over."

I left her standing there, out in the middle of the drive, and gathered my colleagues together against the wall of the building, a good distance away. "I think she's bluffing," I said. "This is London, not the Deep South, and she knows it. But just in case, we all stay here, stick together, don't offer them any excuse to get started. OK?" The other pickets nodded. They looked scared. My legs were jelly, and my teeth wouldn't keep still. Trish, I was not surprised to see, was flushed and smiling. "Pete, you still got that mobile phone? Right, I want you to call the police, and John at the union, in that order. I'm going to go and talk to Ruth, see if we can calm this down."

"She's an evil old witch. She won't listen to you."

I didn't look back. "Not now, Trish. This is serious."

Fighting a desperate urge to throw up, I walked over to Ruth. "Look, Ruth, this is getting out of hand, don't you think? Let's talk about this before someone gets hurt."

"Why should I talk?" she said. "I'm not the one that's going to get hurt." She lifted one hand high in the air, and yelled "OK!"

The security thugs got back into their vehicle. "Ruth, for Christ's sake!"

She didn't answer. As the van started to move towards us, slowly picking up speed, Ruth began to unwind the bandages from her face. "Damn things itch," she said, her tone chillingly conversational.

There was a shout from behind me. I turned to see Trish, running like a champion sprinter, her legs almost a blur of motion. For one crazy, horrible moment, I thought she was going to attack Ruth.

I was right.

With a scream that sounded like "*Bitch!*" but probably wasn't, Trish leapt at Ruth. The plant manager, temporarily blinded by the unfurling bandages, screamed too – and toppled. The two of them flew (literally, it seemed to me, *flew*) three or four yards across the tarmac, directly under the wheels of the security van.

There was a noise that I couldn't describe, and that you wouldn't believe even if you'd heard it.

The van squealed to a halt, and its driver jumped out, took one look under his wheels, and staggered away, sobbing. Cursing myself for never learning any first aid, I rushed over. As soon as I saw what the driver had seen, I knew that all the first aid courses in the world wouldn't have done any good. Not against a van that solid, going at that speed. The two women were unmistakably dead. Their heads, which had somehow ended up directly under the front wheels, were utterly unrecognizable.

Five years later, as she got into the back of my taxi outside a gay pub in south London, Trish said playfully: "Fancy going for an Indian?"

I buckled my seat-belt. Neither of us spoke for a while. Eventually, I asked: "Where to?"

She gave me an address. I checked it in the *A to Z*, and set off.

At the first red traffic lights, Trish said, "Well, it's certainly nice to see you again."

There were two things I could do, I reckoned. Just ignore everything, pretend this had never happened, try to forget it. Or I could ask her who she was.

For a mile or so, I went with the first option. But it wasn't working.

"I gave evidence at the inquest into your death," I told her.

"Yes," she said. Another mile passed. I wanted to drive quickly, get this impossible journey over with, but the state I was in, I didn't dare.

"Tell me something," I said at last.

"Anything," she replied, her voice soft and innocent.

"How do you kill a witch?"

"Ah, well. There are various ways."

"But running her over with a security van isn't one of them?"

She was quiet for a moment, and then she said: "No. That wouldn't work."

"So you were wrong about Ruth?"

"Oh, Ken!" She sounded impatient. "OK, wrong in detail, perhaps, but not in principle."

I risked a glance at her in the rear-view mirror. "And

you?"

She moved forward in her seat and placed her hands on my shoulders, one either side. She rested her head against my neck and her long hair brushed my left ear. "Do you really want to know?"

I decided, without hesitation, that I didn't. Right decision, wrong decision, I don't know; but it was what I decided.

We arrived at the address she'd given me. I stopped the car, and popped the electronic lock on the passenger door. She got out, and came round to the driver's window. She reached in and took one of the cab company's business cards off the dashboard.

"Anyway," said Trish. "That's good. I'll know where to find you, next time you need me."

Mat Coward is the author of *Twenty-Seventeen*, a juvenile sf novel published in October 2002 by Heinemann. He is also the author of the crime novels *Up & Down* (2000) and *In & Out* (2001). He adds: "A collection of my short crime stories is planned under the title *Do the World ■ Favour & Other Stories*, with an introduction by Ian Rankin; from Five Star in the USA." His non-fiction "how-to" book *Success... and How to Avoid It* was published in 2001 by TTA Press. His sf and fantasy stories have appeared for the most part in *Interzone*; they are: "We All Saw It" (issue 155), "The Second Question" (issue 169), "Time Spent in Reconnaissance" (issue 181), "Early Retirement" (issue 182) and "Little Green Card" (issue 183). Mat lives in Frome, Somerset.

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The SMART MINEFIELD

Chris Butler

The truck was already starting to move as I jumped in and pulled the door shut. It gave a good solid clang. Dan was driving and Steve sat in the back seat across from me. I'd met them the night before in the barracks but I hadn't yet met the Captain. He turned round in the front passenger seat and thrust his hand back towards me. "You'll be the new kid," he said cheerily.

"Yes, s-sir," I said, and shook his hand. I was annoyed with myself for stammering because I'd wanted to make a good first impression.

He pointed at his hard helmet, his name emblazoned across the front of it in big blue letters: YOUNG. "I'm not exactly," he admitted. "In any case, we like to keep things on a first name basis round here. You met Dan and Steve?"

"Last night, yes."

"Hope they looked after you. Welcome aboard, John."

The truck's suspension had obviously seen better days and a series of jolts went up my spine painfully as we juddered over the grate at the exit to the compound.

Minoru's sun had risen just above the horizon as we hurtled out into the Zone. There was no glass in the door-frame of the truck so I could lean out to survey the landscape, which baked in the furnace air. All I could see was barren desert reaching out to the horizon.

The truck kicked up a lot of dust from the dirt track laughingly referred to as "The Road." Steve kept adjusting his helmet and complaining that he didn't feel com-

fortable in it. A flock of Cale came and flew with us for a while. They swooped down level with the wheels then launched themselves in great arcs ahead of us. Like dolphins jumping at the bow of a ship on Earth. Of course, that was long ago, but I've seen the holos.

We travelled for a few hours away from the base camp; then the truck lurched to an abrupt halt. I wiped a hand across the back of my neck, shifting a thick film of sweat.

"This is it," the Captain said. In a few more hours the tanks would roll through the path we had to clear. "Get to work. And John, try not to blow yourself up on your first day."

The other three laughed, and I let them have their fun. I appreciated the fact that they weren't treating me like a child. They hadn't given me a lecture of Do's and Don'ts. They assumed I knew my job and expected me to carry it out. The Captain took the lead as we set out on foot.

Without exception, the landmines in this sector were designed to blow up heavy artillery, nothing smaller. Our Ottawa Convention had outlawed antipersonnel mines, and the other side didn't seem to go in for them either. So a man on foot did not possess sufficient mass for his weight to detonate the device. Unlike the truck, which, with four passengers, might conceivably be mistaken for a small tank.

"Yep," the Captain said, "the aerial reconnaissance is correct. This is a minefield all right."

All the camouflage and all the non-reflective, non-con-

ductive construction techniques in this world, or any other world for that matter, couldn't disguise a field of this size.

"It's big, then," Dan deduced.

"It's a big 'un all right," the Captain confirmed.

The four of us were connected with an LM200 mini-web, communicating by microwaves. I switched to my virtual eyes and studied the readouts. I might have expected the tactical display to light up like a Christmas tree. But in fact it just showed a faint glow. The mines were well concealed all right. But they were there, and lots of them.

Steve pulled a spade from the rucksack strapped to his back. I thought he looked almost as though he was drawing a sword from a scabbard, but I guess I was just being fanciful. Anyway, he stepped up to the front purposefully. Steve said he had a nose for landmines. Like a man divining for water he set off, assessing the terrain, taking in the details, seeing the peaks and the troughs. Then suddenly he stopped, scooped away the top layer of dirt and bent down to inspect beneath the surface.

"Oh my Lord!" he exclaimed. "Hey guys, come get a load of this!"

He continued digging until the rest of us joined him and together we all crouched down and stared into the pit.

"That's a smart mine," Dan commented. "And I don't mean it is formally attired."

I laughed. You could tell I was the new boy on the team. The others knew better than to laugh at one of Dan's jokes.

We all stood up again. The Captain pressed a sweaty forefinger and thumb to the bridge of his nose, succeeding only in pushing sweat into his eyes where it stung venomously. He winced and gave me an uneasy smile. "You know what that is?"

I snapped to attention. "That is a T3500 sm-smart mine, m-manufactured by the MallTech Corporation, designed circa 2960, first a-active use circa..."

"Okay, okay," the Captain said wearily. "You know what it is, you know all about it." He gestured to me to relax. "But do you know what it's doing here?"

I glanced around. There was nothing much to see, no landmarks of any kind. Just a field that stretched to the horizon whichever direction you looked, and a long, straight road that cut through it. "Well," I said slowly, "if it's our mines then I guess we p-planted 'em."

The four of us all nodded in agreement.

Steve said, "Assholes, ain't we?"

We all kept nodding.

The Captain turned to me again. "That would have been a long time ago. So, new kid who knows it all – how do you suggest we deal with these suckers?"

"Well, I guess the first thing to d-do is to find out whether the field is operating in its 'smart' capacity."

"Good thinking," the Captain barked. "Steve, give him a hand. See if you can deactivate this mine, and then we'll see how the field reacts. Dan, you're with me."

Steve and I watched for a moment as the other two men headed back to the truck. My thoughts went back

to the training school, and the lecture on the theory of the smart minefield. The idea was that all the mines in the field were optimally positioned equidistant from each other so as to allow no safe passage through the field. The mines communicated with each other in order to confirm their position. If any mine were to be disarmed or otherwise disabled, then all the mines in the field would reposition themselves to again provide optimum coverage of the field, only now with fewer mines.

A mine repositioned itself by means of a powerful hydraulic foot with which it would literally launch itself into the air, flinging itself to its new position. It sounded ludicrous, but it worked. It worked ludicrously well.

The normal job of a team of minefield disposal experts was to clear a path through the field, not to clear the entire field. But you couldn't do that with a smart field. It wouldn't let you. Clear a mine and the field reacted to plug the gap.

"Should be quite a sight when this f-field re-positions itself," I said. I have to admit I was quite excited about it.

"You mean when thousands of explosive mines leap into the air all around us?"

"It'll probably only be a few dozen in the immediate vicinity. We're only making a small hole in the field. It's unlikely that every m-mine in the field will move. It doesn't really need to in order to effectively prevent safe passage through the field. It would be a waste of energy for the entire field to react."

"Oh, well, that's all right then."

Steve had the top-plate off the mine and he examined the interior. Firstly he disabled the hydraulic foot. The last thing we needed was for the mine to launch itself while we were peering down at it. Then he disabled the firing mechanism since we didn't particularly want it to detonate either.

"Still c-can't believe you screwed that girl back at Fort Bridgeport last night," I said.

"She was lonely."

"She was m-married and she already had a lover on the other side of town. How lonely c-could she be?"

"Okay. Not lonely. She was eager."

The two of us lifted the mine out of the soil. One fortunate thing about the mine was that it was designed to be lightweight. As we lifted it, the hydraulic foot extended to hang limply beneath it. Quickly we carried it back to the truck, aware that at any moment the field might react.

But it failed to do so. To be sure, we had two choices. Put the mine in the truck and drive it further out of position, or perform the final part of the deactivation process, and disable its radio transmitter.

The Captain said, "There's no way I'm driving away from a chance to see a smart minefield re-align itself. Kill its radio," and he grinned.

Steve picked up a screwdriver and jammed it into the sealed unit that housed the radio circuitry. Unexpectedly this caused a spark and a plume of smoke bubbled up towards him. Reflexively he jerked back from the device, more in surprise than alarm, and fell flat on his back. Consequently he missed the sight of hundreds of mines

launching themselves into the air, kicking up dust as they landed in their new positions.

"Oooh!" Dan cooed. And the Captain and I nodded appreciatively.

Steve staggered to his feet. "What? Did I miss it? Ah shit!"

Dan figured he had the problem sussed. "This is easy," he said. "We disable the firing mechanisms but leave the radio transmitters intact. We can work the road, make it safe for the tanks to come through, and the mines out to the sides won't know anything is amiss. Standard approach, clear a path through."

"Reckon that w-would work?" I asked.

"Sure," Dan said, liking the fact that he had apparently impressed the new kid, and he stepped forward, eager to get started. He slapped me on the back as he set off in search of the next mine to be disarmed. Steve hurried after him. The critter had sparked him and he was eager to get some payback.

The Captain clawed futilely at the corner of his eye, still trying to ease the stinging sensation there. "Reckon it'll work?" he asked.

I studied my two new colleagues in the distance, squinting slightly as the heat haze made the landscape shimmer. "Might do," I replied. "Depends what generation of m-mine we have here."

"Generation?"

"Thing is, Captain, when these mines were first d-deployed there was an assumption that the enemy was of limited intelligence."

The Captain scoffed. *If only.*

"Pretty soon, they realized that the mines had to be improved."

Steve glanced in our direction, probably wondering when we were going to start helping. The Captain threw him a dismissive gesture, which I guess Steve interpreted as meaning that we were busy.

"Most likely thing," I continued, "is that the radio transmitter is w-wired into a test circuit for the detonator. Disarm the detonator, the radio circuit automatically shuts itself down."

"So how come the radio in this one," the Captain pointed at the dead specimen at our feet, "didn't shut down till Steve punched a screwdriver through it?"

"Well, could be it's an early-generation mine and Steve and Dan are on the right t-track. Or it could be that there's a time delay in the radio shutdown, which happened to correspond to the t-time taken to carry the mine back here and for Steve to, with surgical precision, apply his screwdriver."

The Captain turned wearily in the direction of the two men in the distance. They had deactivated a mine each and had now started work on their second. "We'll know soon enough," he said.

At that moment, hundreds of mines launched themselves into the air, and then rained down around the startled duo. When the dust settled the dejected men walked back to rejoin us.

"Anyone for tennis?" the Captain quipped. That was a good one and we all laughed without feeling guilty about

it.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Dan said in a Daffy Duck voice, "This means war!"

"Yes, yes," the Captain said, "look, we've got tanks coming through here in a couple of hours. They're not coming through unless we clear this field. More importantly, there's a single malt whisky back at the base with my name on it and I'm thirsty. Kid, you seem to be the expert on these things. What would you recommend?"

I smiled, happy to be centre stage. I spoke quickly, enthusiastically. "The thing about these mines, it's not the mine you're working on that matters, it's the rest. You have to think big, think about the whole field. If you want to clear the mines from the road, you have to make the whole field want to let you. You see where I'm g-going?"

The Captain nodded. "If we can make the field think that there are mines on the road, by generating fake radio transmissions, then the real mines would move elsewhere."

"Create a whole row of mines that don't really exist?" Dan scoffed. "We'll never get that up and running in time."

"He's right," I admitted. "The b-best way would be to redefine the perimeter of the field. Hack into the field's net, get at the data, then we c-could move the whole field away from the road. The mines would literally move out of our way of their own volition. But hacking into their net is probably impossible in the time we have. I mean, we might g-get lucky and crack the encryption real fast. But chances are we won't."

The Captain pointed decisively at Dan and ordered him to get started on that approach. "Right," he said, turning his attention back to me, "any other ideas?"

"How many t-tanks have to come through here?"

"About 20."

"And how quickly do they have to get through?"

"They can go slowly, as long as they're moving. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we put a mine on the tank, and then drive the tank through the f-field."

Steve laughed. "Surely that'll never work."

"It should," I insisted. "As the tank drives into the field, all the other mines should rearrange themselves to be anywhere other than where the tank is."

"But they'll be hopping all over the place. Surely the field is designed to resist that in some way."

"Depends which g-generation of mine we're dealing with. Wanna give it a try?"

Five minutes later we had a mine in our truck and I was ready to drive into the field. We'd had to securely fasten the mine in place with some restraining clamps in order to prevent it trying to jump itself to another position in the field. I put the truck in gear and let it inch forward. As I drove into the field, the mine in the truck therefore taking up a position in the field, the landscape suddenly became alive with jumping mines. They jumped out of my way, moving off to the sides. Then as the truck made further progress, a mine would move in behind to take up the position newly vacated by the advancing vehicle.

For a while there I thought it was working, but then the field stopped reacting. It went quiet like a lion crouching down in tall grass. I jumped out of the truck and started running back toward the other men. The force of the explosion knocked me to the ground. Debris from the truck rained down all around me. Something bounced off my hard helmet and skittered off into the dirt.

I apologized to the Captain for the loss of the vehicle, and enquired as to whether Dan was making any progress.

Dan had in fact managed to gain access to the field's network. He could see the data defining the field's perimeter. Unfortunately, the data was write-protected and couldn't be modified without a password, which of course he didn't have. He'd been trying to find another way in, but so far without success.

I suggested trying to modify the data defining the mine's own position. Moving the mine ten feet to the left was the same as moving the field ten feet to the right. But again the data was protected and couldn't be modified.

The Captain was beginning to worry. In 20 minutes the tanks would be arriving. We couldn't even communicate with the base camp because the radio had been in the truck. And we were too far away from the base for our local web to connect to it. He paced up and down nervously. "We have to come up with something. Fast. Think of something, now!"

"What's the programming language for the software?" I asked.

"Some object-oriented shit," Dan said.

"Built on library classes?"

"Yes, that's right. Off the shelf building blocks, which they built the app on top of."

"3D co-ordinate system?"

"Eh?"

"Their basic co-ordinate class. Is it three d-dimensional?"

"Yes, it is actually. Overkill for a 2D app..."

Dan froze, suddenly seeing where I was heading. Then he was pulling various code-fragments out of his library files and the hacklets started flying round the web furiously.

"What?" the Captain asked.

I explained. "The minefield is two d-dimensional. It has width and length, but not height. However the underlying s-software allows for a position to have a height. Therefore a mine could be given a height. In the real world it's not realistic for a mine to have a height, but in the software simulation it absolutely can. If we're lucky, they haven't p-protected that height variable, because they haven't anticipated it ever being used."

"Bingo," Dan said. "I have access. You want me to try it?"

I smiled and concluded my explanation. "The field is currently defined to be, say, a mile wide and a mile deep, and zero miles high. We're going to ch-change that and make it, I don't know, shall we say 200 miles high? Just stick in a b-big number, Dan."

He did so, and the entire field erupted into life. Mines hopped continuously. As soon as they landed they hopped

again. Dan and I fell about laughing. Soon Steve and the Captain were laughing along with us.

"What on Earth are they doing?" the Captain asked, dumbfounded.

"They're trying to take up positions to fully occupy the interior of the minefield. Which is now three-dimensional. Fortunately for us, gravity is preventing them from reaching their intended position in the field. They're trying but they can't get there."

"Will they keep doing this indefinitely?"

"Well no, they'll run out of power. Hopefully soon. And then with any luck we can get the tanks through before the mines collect enough solar energy to recharge themselves."

The Captain glanced upwards, no shortage of solar energy here.

"Or," I continued, "all of this could t-trigger another self-check in the field, and then the firing mechanisms..."

As one, the four of us started running. Seconds later the mines began detonating, spreading a field of fire across the landscape. It was a spectacular sight, as if a vengeful crimson spirit had possessed the air itself.

After a time, the flames subsided, but still we sweltered under the heat of the sun. And charred black flecks filled the air, clogging in our throats. We stood waiting for the tanks to roll through, knowing we would have to ask the first of them to radio back to the base for help for us. And then we would have to wait for a replacement truck to come and rescue us.

I heard a thud then and I looked around but I couldn't see anything. I didn't figure it out then, but I reckon that what I heard was the mine landing, completing its latest leap. I guess maybe it had travelled a long way, from the furthest reaches of the field, and its power level had fallen to near zero and so it had not self-destructed.

It would have to wait until it had collected enough solar energy to recharge itself, and then it would continue its journey. As the sole remaining mine, its destination was the very centre of the field, and it was still trying to get there.

Soon, the tanks rolled through, safely navigating the charred terrain. No flock of Cale accompanied them; presumably the aftermath of the fire, the stench in the air, had frightened them away. We watched the tanks disappear into the distance, then the four of us settled down on the ground, sharing a flask of water we had been given. The sun beat down fiercely.

"What is it with this sun?" Dan moaned. "Is it trying to kill us?"

But we all smiled as we saw the truck approaching in the distance at last. The Captain polished off the last of the water. "My next drink will be that long awaited whisky," he said cheerily.

The truck had almost reached us when the mine, which by now had recharged itself enough to take another leap, jumped into the path of the oncoming vehicle and blew it up.

That was really downheartening.

At this point there was nothing we could do except set off walking in the direction of the base. Under the intense heat it was touch and go whether we could make it back. We'd been walking for hours already when a small flock of Cale swooped down, circled round us briefly, and then flew away. My legs ached, along with every other muscle in my body. We kept moving.

Later still, I realized that the sun had moved significantly in the sky and had begun its slow descent toward the horizon, but still it beat down on us without mercy and I could feel myself becoming disoriented as dehydration set in.

I switched in to the local web that linked us together. The Captain was three feet to my left, keeping pace with me at the front of the group. Dan was four metres behind. He was sending a babble of incoherent data into the net. I think he was becoming delirious and he was pulling data out of the archives at random. Steve was falling behind, 50 metres now.

We were falling out of formation, but at least we were still in contact. We travelled as quickly as we could manage, doing our utmost to reach our destination.

It was the smart thing to do.

Chris Butler is the author of the sf novel *Any Time Now* (Cosmos Books, 2001), and has previously published short stories in the small press. He lives in Hove, East Sussex, and the above piece represents his *Interzone* debut.

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Searching the British Library website, I found an unexpected new role for myself in the blurb for their Jack Vance critical anthology: "In this collection of appreciations, Hugo and Nebula award-winning authors Dan Simmons and Gene Wolfe join with academics such as David Langford ..."

TALES OF THREE HEMISPHERES

Neil Gaiman won his lawsuit against comics tycoon Todd McFarlane on 3-4 October, establishing copyright interest in "Angela" and two other Gaiman-created characters in the McFarlane *Spawn* universe, plus five comics he had written. He was awarded \$45,000 (the full amount requested by his lawyers) for unauthorized use of his name and biography to imply that he'd endorsed a recent reprint of some of this material. Any profits beyond lawyers' fees will go to charities like the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. *Neil*: "Well, it really wasn't about money. It was about fairness, and sticking to agreements. I may be nice, but I'm not a doormat."

Graham Joyce tried to explain his first novel to his father... *Joyce Junior*: "It's about dreams, and what they mean." *Joyce Senior*: "What do you mean, what dreams mean? They mean you're asleep."

Josh Kirby is remembered in Paul Kidby's cover for *Night Watch* by Terry Pratchett. This parodies Rembrandt's "The Night Watch," which at Terry's suggestion appears on the reverse of the UK hardback for comparison: "No sense in the artist being smart and some people not noticing, eh? Note Josh Kirby in the picture where, in the original, Rembrandt painted him-

self." Just half a face, right at the back...

Darren Nash, former marketing manager for fiction and the Earthlight sf/fantasy imprint at Simon & Schuster UK, became Earthlight's senior editor in October – replacing John Jarrold. Darren was suitably disconcerted when Walter Jon Williams congratulated him on having achieved "omnipotence."

Charles Sheffield (1935-2002), British-born physicist, science writer, and noted hard sf author, died on 2 November aged 67, having undergone surgery for brain cancer in mid-August. He is survived by his wife Nancy Kress, to whom all sympathy. Sheffield famously fictionalized the idea of a space elevator in the same year as Arthur C. Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise*, with his independently conceived novel *The Web Between the Worlds* (1979). His 1993 novelette "Georgia on My Mind" won both Hugo and Nebula awards. He will be much missed.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

As Others See Us. When the BBC acquired Steven Spielberg's new sf series *Taken* (dealing with "extra-terrestrial experiences" in the form of good old alien abductions), their head of programme acquisition Sophie Turner Laing was quick to explain its staggering innovativeness, unheard-of in mere science fiction: "*Taken* is designed to have a wider appeal than just to fans of sci-fi, as it tells the stories of individuals and their interactions over many years." (*Independent*, 23 October) • "Science-fiction films can usually be separated into two sub genres: horror and fantasy." (Text explaining the nature of sf, from DVD edition of *Sphere*.)

R.I.P. André de Toth (1913-2002), Hungarian-born director, died on 27 October at age 89. His *House of Wax* (1953) was the first 3D horror film, an effect which – having only one eye – he couldn't see. • **Richard Harris** (1930-2002), Oscar-nominated Irish actor who did little genre work but played Dumbledore in the first two Harry Potter films, died from cancer on 25 October; he was 72. • **Nathan Juran** (1907-2002), Austrian-born US director who won an Oscar for non-genre art direction and later did much B-movie sf and horror, died on 1 November. His films included *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, with Ray Harryhausen's special effects, and *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (both 1958). • **John Lucas**, writer, producer and director of the original *Star Trek*

series, died from leukaemia on 19 October. He was 83. • **Raymond T. McNally** (1931-2002), Dracula scholar and co-author with Radu Florescu of *In Search of Dracula* (1972) and *In Search of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (2001), died on 2 October aged 71. • **Craig Mills** (1955-2002), US author of five fantasies published from 1982 to 1995, died from a heart attack on 15 October. • **Dennis Patrick**, US TV character actor who appeared in the 1966-71 Gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* and a spinoff film, died on 12 or 13 October; he was 84. • **Jonathan Harris** (1920-2002), US actor famed in sf circles as Dr Zachary Smith in *Lost in Space* (CBS 1965-8; "Oh, the pain..."), died on 3 November aged 81.

News from Pravda. Possibly taking their cue from all those Australians who gave their religion as Jedi, young Russians in Perm have been filling out census forms with "hobbit" or "elf" as nationality.

World Fantasy Awards. Novel: Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Other Wind*. Novella: S. P. Somtow, "The Bird Catcher." Short: Albert E. Cowdrey, "Queen for a Day." Anthology: *The Museum of Horrors* ed. Dennis Etchison. Collection: Nalo Hopkinson, *Skin Folk*. Artist: Allen Koszowski. Special/Professional: (tie) Stephen Jones, Jo Fletcher – both for editing. Special/Non-Professional: Raymond Russell & Rosalie Parker (Tartarus Press). Life Achievement: George Scithers, Forrest J Ackerman.

Judging by the Cover. A literary agent with a young female client was reportedly asked by the publisher: "Never mind the book. What does she look like?" *Liz Williams* was moved to devise a cunning plan: "I have a namesake on the Web who is a 'fashion model' – when last doing a vanity search for myself, I discovered a picture of 'Liz Williams,' sporting waist-length blonde hair and a leather thong. Since this is a look which I have not previously considered adopting, I was thinking of e-mailing her and suggesting she impersonate me at conventions...."

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Eyeballs in the Sky*. "Seigneur, I have invented forty new dishes for to-night's banquet," François said pathetically, his eyes creeping out until they hung on the rims of their sockets like desperate people wavering on the edges of precipices." (George Viereck & Paul Eldridge, *Salome The Wandering Jewess*, 1930) • **Neat Tricks Dept.** "They don't kill any of them but the women are – how you say – mutilated. Same way. And beheaded." (Charlee Jacob, "Bonerider," in *Decadence* ed Monica



mutant hogwash

As the bottom numbs beneath the basilisk gaze of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, you can see exactly why skipper Chris Columbus has now jumped ship after this second Transatlantic voyage, because this series is going to burn through directors like nothing we've ever seen. The soothing sameness that was such an attractive feature of the first three Potter books is a creative millstone for the hundreds of gifted and interesting people doomed to spend the next seven years re-enacting the look and feel of the first instalment with agonizing fidelity, for ever-diminishing creative returns, from material of steadily declining quality. The movie version of *Philosopher's Stone* had the genuinely interesting challenge of designing and casting the Potterverse for the screen, and solving the often considerable problems involved in translating JKR plotting into cinematic narrative while deviating as little as possible from the holy books of writ. For that very reason, the feeble jokes and laboured setup in that novel's first half were the part of the film that unfolded rather well, while the second half's superior young-detective plotting and pacey,

gripping climax fell mostly flat in the screen version.

But *Chamber of Secrets* is an altogether different prospect: a much tighter, cleverer, funnier novel than *Stone*, let down only by a notably flabby ending and a plot that even in the book makes no defensible sense whatever. The climax of *Chamber*, in other respects the strongest of the novels by some way, is the point from which the series falls apart: a first glimpse of the transcendental convolutions and Emmethal logic that spiral out of control in the third and fourth seasons, and which are only magnified by translation to screen. Even Maggie Smith, short-straw winner of this instalment's big plot-expo monologue, can't oil away the creaks in the telling, and as always cinema mercilessly magnifies the flaws. It's only when you see the plot spreadeagled for inspection on the big screen that you realize how staggeringly little sense any of *Chamber* makes; and while Steve Kloves' script has once again filleted

the story quite cleverly down to fit medium and (generous) running time, there are also a number of strange misjudgments that introduce further nonsenses. (Why are the Heir's messages now written in blood, and where exactly is the blood supposed to come from?)

Anxiety about cinematic shapeliness is more evident this time around. Lacking a first-act stunt set piece, the film has to overwork the flying-car sequence, complete with gratuitous train chase and mid-air dangle. Lacking a big final scene, the film pulls one out of the sorting hat with a mawkish, huggy welcome home for the cast member who's been least gainfully employed in the body of the film. The climax has been surreptitiously reorganized in ways that actually dissipate the original's coherence and tension – perhaps on purpose, to avoid excessive upset to younger viewers – while the whole Deathday Party set piece appears to have been cut at a very late juncture in editing, making nonsense of the dialogue from the scene that follows.

Yet what does come out rather well from the process of magnification to screen is the deepening in vol. 2 of

Nick Lowe



Rowling's exploration of issues of class, power, and heritage in the educational and political landscape of postmodern Britain. *Chamber* was the novel that first laid bare the series' key theme of access to the pathways of privilege in the British educational system, and the ways in which the governing class tries to control it: through old-boy networking, political footie between rival ministries, and manipulation of governors against teaching staff. As *Chamber* makes clear, present-day debates about widening participation in higher learning have a thousand-year history ("Salazar Slytherin wished to be more selective about the students admitted to Hogwarts"); and the stakes have never been higher. The wizardry of elite education can be used to shore up

feudal structures and the enslavement of the grovelling class; but it can also empower the forces of new mobility against the entrenchment of genetic snobbery and boys-only sports teams.

It's clear enough where Rowling's own instincts lie, having served time at the chalkface in her own apprentice days. But it's also clear that she, like every other human in these islands, feels a deep residual yearning for Malory Towers and its inspirational narratives of merit and morality, in which the unending battle between plutocracy and meritocracy for the souls of the nation's future leaders is played out in serial microdramas in the girls' toilets. (Here, incidentally, the film version expands on the title's coy joke with gratifying gusto, yielding cinema's all-time greatest fantasy sequence about school plumbing.) And translation to cinema only compounds the denial of modernity. The very trainlines to the wellspring of privilege run from the gothic majesty of St Pancras – not grey and boxy King's X – through undeveloped heritage country that manages to bypass entirely the residential and industrial classlands; while the Weasley home is a masterpiece of production design, a cottage-architecture idyll of stripped brickwork and woodburning fireplaces where the traditional knitting magically does itself.

And for what appears to be a state institution, Hogwarts itself is haunted by unanswered questions: who pays the fees? how do they escape having to do RE in Key Stage 3? where's the paperwork, the UNISON strike days, the Ofsted inspections? "As a school treat," Dumbledore cheerfully announces, "all exams have been cancelled." What are the DofE going to say about *that*? Still, it's not the novel-



ist's job to resolve these contradictions, which like everything else are merely inflated in the film. (Even Diagon Alley turns out to have a bad neighbourhood, with the book's fleeting Knockturn Alley sequence blown up into an unsettling glimpse of a Dickensian undercity.) On the whole, the movie of *Chamber of Secrets* does a fairly creditable job with its fairly thankless brief; Kenneth Branagh is funny, the new regulars mesh well, and the kids are well wrangled as ever. Certainly it's hard to see how any of Columbus's successors will be able to make a better Potter film than this, or a shorter. Beat that for a dispiriting thought.

If Harry taps deep into our national aquifers of collective school-story myth, the long-delayed UK release of *Donnie Darko* is a reminder of how different is the US version of this narrative archetype: several years older (with a plot centre in senior year), more socially embedded (school is at the centre of town, family and community, not an isolated colony of boarders), and driven by different kinds of narrative quest. In the case of Richard Kelly's stupendously assured debut as writer-director, this takes the form of weird-but-cool Donnie's 28-day odyssey to a date with the end of the world via the dark underspaces of smalltown society under the tutelage of a scary giant bunny. As Lynchian as the sea is wet, it's peopled by a huge ensemble cast of bizarre characters with random star faces dotted around in artfully unexpected places; xprod Drew Barrymore got herself cast as a teacher, which is high enough concept on its own. And it boasts sheetloads of fantastic dialogue ("Emotional prob-





Above: *Harry Potter and the something of something* – Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) in some bother.
Facing page: top left, Robbie Coltrane as Hagrid; top right, Hermione Granger (Emma Watson) mixes the polyjuice potion. Bottom, Harry encounters Nearly Headless Nick (John Cleese).

lems? Cool – I have those!”), and a magnificent soundtrack of golden-age English chamber music (Joy Division, Echo and the Bunnymen, Tears for Fears, Duran Duran).

It has to be said that, like *Chamber of Secrets*, *Donnie Darko* stakes a lot on its ending being good enough, and loses. Time-twister plotting is an unforgiving art, not really recommended for a writer-director who, like the mistress of Hogwarts herself, is stronger at setup than resolution. As Kelly has clearly sussed, you can do pretty much anything you like with a countdown to doomsday and a town full of secrets; but in conventional terms there are some quite glaring fluffs in the plotting and pace, and the

overfull storyline is full of things that need to go somewhere but don't, like the recurring scenes of the crazy old lady who once wrote the plot manual (*The Philosophy of Time Travel*) checking her mailbox daily for a mystery something that never does arrive. Still, it's a rare experience to watch a film where you genuinely don't know from one scene to the next what's going to happen or how it's all going to end; and if some of the endings you guess along the way are better than the one you get, and less good than the one you could have had, at least it makes the countdown fun.

It's end-of-the-world month all over again in Danny Boyle and team's *28*

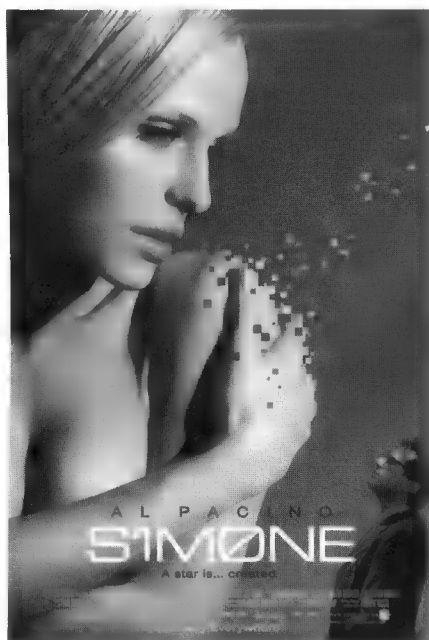
Days Later..., a spirited attempt at updating the great British apocalypse tale by nicking everything that isn't bolted down from *The Omega Man* and carting it off to Wyndham country on the roofrack. It has to be said at once that this marriage of grand survivalist narratives from opposite sides of the ocean only reinforces the sense of two nations divided by a single film language. Faced with a similar difficulty involving a rogue virus turning the entire population psychotic apart from a small band of plucky uninfected survivors, a US version would tool up with automatic weapons in the opening minutes; yet all the London posse have is, erm, baseball bats.

Is this irony? it's all too ironic to tell. International viewers, raised on a cinema that generally heroizes the working-class fighting man, will be bemused by the loathing displayed here for the squaddie end of white English proletarian male culture; but they're well enough used to the demonization of the public-school officer class, so will at least understand why the last middle-class person in England (Christopher Ecclestone) needs to be killed off so that the taxi drivers and pharmacy assistants can inherit the earth.

More exciting but less resonant than the more self-consciously mythic *Reign of Fire*, with which it's doomed to be bracketed, *28 Days* is one of those films that seeks to make its point through familiarity rather than novelty – which is just as well, because Alex Garland's script is so full of holes you could catch dolphin-friendly tuna with it. (Why do they have to walk everywhere? The hero was a *bike courier* in his backstory life, yet it never occurs to any of the characters that there might be speedier ways to get to Lewisham than walking the length of the Docklands Light Railway.) Plot, characters, and dialogue are largely drivel, and the ending transcends all three, but this is a film that relies more on the power of its images and narrative momentum than on any claim to intelligent thought, and it's certainly very well made within its chosen limits. The decision to shoot on digital video pays off brilliantly in style and speed, with Boyle's snatch-and-grab shots of post-apocalypse London surely the supreme achievement of DV filmmaking to date. It's clearly not a technology that lends itself easily as yet to traditional special effects; viewers old enough to remember matte lines will feel a nostalgic thrill at the visible seams between doctored and undoctored areas of image, and if you look closely you'll notice Big Ben move four hours in a couple of minutes between the shot where the face was digitally

Below: *Donnie Darko*'s “date with the end of the world via the dark underspaces of smalltown society under the tutelage of a scary giant bunny.”





altered and the shot where they decided it wasn't worth trying to make it look convincing. But there's a refreshing energy in the narrative thrust, the creative cheapness, and (especially) the celebration of one of our great national myths updated for a punkier sensibility.

There's another Plague virus in Andrew Niccol's *Simone*, but it's labelled "version 8.1" and comes on a 5.25" floppy, both of which give a fair sense of the level of IT literacy on display. Nevertheless, *Simone* marks the renowned kiwi fantasist's long-awaited return to authored cinema after the box-office bellyflop of his directorial debut *Gattaca* and the personal frustrations of what was done by other hands to his *Truman Show* script; and we should be grateful to whatever career-suicidal executive whim got this daft film greenlighted, because though everything about it screams STIFF it's an absolute delight to watch and a bizarre miracle it ever got made.

A film entirely unshackled by any wishy-washy regard for commercial reason (or any other kind), *Simone* offers a nudge-in-the-ribs update of *Frankenstein* for the digital age in which fading auteur "Victor Taransky" – ow, that elbow was *hard* – creates an all-virtual screen goddess who won't give him creative grief by throwing primadonna tantrums in the way of his vision, only to find himself enslaved and destroyed by the celebrity monster he's created. Less funny than it thinks it is most of the time, it's nevertheless refreshingly uninhibited by a sense of obligation to any kind of logic beyond that of relentless satirical escalation, as *Simone* graduates from arthouse star to sta-

dium-filling chanteuse without anyone but computer dunce Victor involved backscene. Al Pacino does his drunk and baffled routine as enjoyably as ever, and then some – if that man shambled any more, he'd be a shoggoth – while the piquant casting of Winona Ryder, as the leading lady from hell Victor seeks to replace, was a stroke of inspiration that deserved to pay off more. You'd have thought, following our heroine's recent career initiatives, that the production could have made its money back simply by canny licensing-out of the scene where ■ skipload of lifesize Winonas are carted off to the dump.

As a projection of Niccol's own disgruntlement as a writer trying to realize his vision with a philistine studio environment of besuited dimwits, *Simone* has the sense to send Victor's character up as relentlessly as everyone else – making it clear from an early point that he's a truly terrible director, given to titles like *Eternity Forever* and dialogue like "Love is like a wild flower, but that flower only grows on the edge

of a very high cliff." Yet there's instant resonance, in the image of a control-freak writer-director who treats his human actors as just one further kind of digital puppet, with the most powerful franchise author in cinema history; and the central irony of Victor's progress as a fable of the old Hollywood and the new is that his revived career as Simone's proprietary author leads him inexorably from old-style auteur moviemaking to the new-style industry creativities of talent management and cross-media marketing. In the end, the technology for redemption rests in the hands of the kids: it's Victor's iBook-wielding teenage daughter, born of the seemingly doomed union of creative author and bottomline-fixated studio producer, who brings the family back together and resurrects the franchise from premature demise by merely hitting a couple of keys and restoring the whole plot to the state it was in before the ending virus shivered it all to bits. Maybe they could run that one next on *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Nick Lowe

SimOne: Al Pacino creates a virtual actress, Sim One.



Line *on the* Palm

Zoran Živković

I carefully examined the client at my door. This is extremely important in my work. A person's outer appearance says a lot about his future. Or rather, about what he would like to hear about his future. People don't go to a clairvoyant to be told bad news, and then have to pay for it. They don't need someone like me for that. What they expect from me is help, as they would from a doctor or clergyman. And I provide this help. The basic motto in my line of work is: the customer must leave my parlour satisfied. After that, things take their own course.

Actually, if I were to predict that something bad was going to happen, I'm certain almost no one would believe me. This seems to be part of human nature. If you tell people something that suits them, they all accept it eagerly, regardless of how implausible or even impossible it might appear. Sometimes it seems the more incredible the favourable prophecy, the easier it is for them to accept. They don't quibble. And of course, if you tell them something that doesn't suit them, they immediately become doubtful and suspicious. They launch into a debate on reliability, and then on the meaning of divination, endeavouring to show it's all pure quackery that only the gullible would swallow. If that's true, then why

on earth did they come to see me?

The customer's age made him unusual from the start. Mostly middle-aged people visit me. Younger people are not overly bothered by the future because they think they have it in abundance. They have all the time in the world before them. Older folks know they don't have any future, so it doesn't interest them very much. Between the age of 40 and 50, however, people start to settle their accounts. And the realization of their own mortality always is part and parcel of this. Although almost no one would be willing to admit it, what brings a great many people to my parlour is the newly aroused fear of death. What they want most of all from me is a guarantee that judgment day is still a long way off. And of course I provide this guarantee. At a very moderate price, even though they would be willing to pay much more. One mustn't profit from the misfortunes of others.

The young man was no more than 25 years old. I don't remember a younger person ever coming into my parlour. His height was emphasized by a long, olive-drab raincoat with broad overlapping lapels. A light-weight white shawl was thrown casually around his neck, its ends reaching almost to his waist. He had a long face with regular features, more masculine than handsome. His

thick black hair was combed straight back from his high forehead. He wore small round wire-rimmed glasses. Shortsightedness at his age probably resulted from years of intensive reading. His umbrella was in its sheath, hooked over his left arm.

He was wearing thin black-leather gloves that made his hands invisible. That's the first thing I examine in any customer. If you are skilful at noticing things, which I must be in this job, hands can reveal a vast amount of useful information about a visitor. Shoes as well. The young man's shoes were clean and polished in spite of the bad weather. Even overly clean. This indicated a finicky individual, inclined to nit-picking, someone who has difficulty changing an entrenched opinion. The way he'd tied his laces indicated someone who liked orderliness, regularity, symmetry. It was unlikely he could see nuances. Only extremes: either-or. This was not exactly a good sign. It was much easier to work with less orderly, more easy-going visitors. The ones I liked the best were actually those who paid no attention at all to their appearance.

He hovered at the door to my parlour, examining it with the same curiosity that I turned towards him. This was clearly the first time he'd come to a place like this. His eyes skimmed through the semi-dark room, absorbing the details. I was certain that he was taking it all in, that nothing escaped his attention. His lips suddenly pursed into a grimace of disapproval, even disgust, when he saw the little glass boxes on the small shelf to the left of my worktable. They contained several specimens of what were erroneously believed to be traditional trappings of the fortune-telling trade: the wing of a bat, tail of a rat, eye of an owl, tooth of a wild boar, skin of a snake, claw of a hawk...

I don't like these things either. That's why the shelf is in a place that is outside my field of vision when I sit at my worktable, where I spend most of my time. But these things have their purpose. They impress the customers. The great majority of my visitors come with a completely stereotyped notion of what a fortune-teller's parlour looks like, so I don't dare let them down. Everything here is set up and modelled after what you'd find in a popular film.

The finishing touch is a small cauldron of water – electric, but a fire seems to be underneath it – with wispy steam rising in a column, coloured pink by the beam of a hidden red light. From time to time a strong, seemingly exotic fragrance emanates from the steam, although what I put in the water to get it is something quite ordinary. Whenever possible I try to avoid using that fragrance additive because after a while it gives me a headache and even makes me nauseous.

When I felt I had given the new customer enough time to inspect the parlour, I bowed briefly and said, "Good evening, sir. Please sit down." My hand motioned towards the chair on the other side of the table.

"Good evening," replied the young man, staying by the door. If I'd heard his voice over the telephone, I would have said he was at least ten years older.

Periodically I have a visitor who, after entering the parlour, seems instantly to regret having done so, and

would like to leave without delay. Two or three have almost run out of the room, horrified, after spending less than a minute inside. Those who make it through that first minute usually stay. I know from experience how best to act towards reluctant customers who can't seem to detach themselves from the door. I strike up a conversation about something innocuous, neutral. So they can relax. Afterwards everything is a lot easier.

"It's not raining," I said half-questioningly, nodding towards his umbrella in its sheath.

"No, it's not," he said in confirmation. "Mist has set in, although the weathermen forecast rain. That's why I brought it."

"Weathermen," I repeated with a proper dose of derision. "Don't count on weathermen when it comes to forecasting the future. They don't know a thing about it. They pretend what they're doing is some sort of science, but all they really know how to do is make an educated guess. And most often it turns out to be wrong."

"But it's not like that here, is it?" His voice took on a tinge of irony.

"Of course not," I replied, feigning offence. "Would you come here if you thought I had no more skill than a weatherman?"

"The fact that I came doesn't prove a thing. Maybe I shouldn't have. Just like I was wrong when I listened to the weather forecast and brought an umbrella."

"Perhaps. But there's no way to know until you've tried it. Since you've already given the weatherman a chance to show what he can do, it wouldn't be fair not to give me the same chance." I inserted a brief, tactical pause. "In any case, just to show you how much I believe in my abilities, here's what I propose. Although the usual practice here is to pay in advance, you don't have to. I will only take my fee at the end of the séance. And only if you are satisfied." This always works. People feel safe if they don't have to pay in advance for what might be bad news. Since there never is any, of course, they willingly pay in the end. It's not unusual for them to add a big tip, so when they leave there is mutual satisfaction.

He looked at me without speaking for a few moments. "But you can't know in advance whether I'll be satisfied. What if you predict something I don't like?"

"I'm prepared to take that risk," I said self-confidently. "Please, sit down." As he continued to stand indecisively by the door, I added with a smile, "Don't worry, nothing will happen to you." This was another tested method with my male visitors. The easiest way to break them is to touch on their vanity. What, me afraid of an ordinary little old fortune-teller? With the ladies the same results are achieved using a calculated touch of flattery.

He finally left the door and came up to the table. He stood in front of me for a moment, confused, not knowing what to do with his umbrella, and then he hooked the handle on the back of the chair and sat down. I could have suggested he leave the umbrella and raincoat at the coat rack by the door – the parlour was heated, of course – but I didn't because I was suddenly convinced that he would refuse. He seemed like someone who only feels safe in the armour he has put on, sword in hand. With-

out them he would be naked and vulnerable, like a knight in a bedroom.

I didn't get down to business right away. In keeping with well-established protocol, I first looked him piercingly in the eyes a good 15 seconds, not saying a word. Few visitors are able to withstand this meticulous inspection. The others lower their eyes quickly and start to fidget. This assures that authority has been achieved. The conversation that follows is similar to that between a doctor and his patient or between a priest and a member of the flock. But the young man didn't flinch; his dark brown eyes calmly returned my gaze through the thick lenses of his glasses. In the end I was the first to withdraw, aware of the fact that a difficult séance awaited me. It couldn't be helped, though. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to choose my customers. Fortunately, such visitors are quite uncommon.

"So, you'd like to know what the future holds for you?"

"That's why people come here, isn't it?"

"Yes, by and large. Which of the procedures would you like to use? All the classical methods are available." I started to show him the paraphernalia in front of me. "Gazing into a crystal ball, reading several types of cards or the grounds from a cup of coffee you have drunk. There is also throwing beans, pieces of wood or bones. And astrology, of course. For a supplementary payment the future can be foretold through the entrails of a freshly slaughtered animal, although this requires special preparations. Particularly if the customer chooses a larger species. Such as an ox."

At this point I always smile broadly in order to show the horrified visitor that I am only joking. Most often I get a smile in return, often with a sigh of relief, but the young man's face remained unchanged and serious.

"If none of these techniques suits you," I hurried to add, "even though they have proved successful for thousands of years, there are also new methods. We could use a computer, for example." I turned my head towards the monitor on the corner of my large worktable. The fact that it was under a plastic cover with a thick layer of dust on top indicated the interest of my customers in modern forms of predicting the future. "I have an excellent, professional divination program. Imported."

"I'd like you to read my palm. If you do that."

"Of course I read palms," I replied in a tone that was intended to express, more than the words, just how amazed I was at such a question. "I didn't mention it because no one has asked for it in quite some time. It seems as though palm reading has gone out of fashion. Maybe you didn't know it, but there are changes of fashion in fortune-telling just as in everything else. Although, with palm reading, this is somewhat peculiar, since the palm is part of your body and can thus be considered the most direct, reliable indicator of your fate. I think you made a good choice."

The young man, who until then had kept his hands in his lap, hidden from my view, slowly raised his right hand and laid it palm up on the green felt that covered the middle part of the table, illuminated by a narrow

beam of bright light.

I waited several moments, but since he wasn't about to do anything, I said, "It might be helpful if you took off your glove."

The gloomy seriousness on his face softened for the first time. "Sorry," he said, with an expression of discomfort. He wasn't quick about it, however. He took off the glove with slow movements, almost with reluctance. He suddenly reminded me of a striptease artist starting her act. When he was finished, he briefly held his hand clenched in a fist before opening it up – apparently against his better judgment.

I didn't look at his palm right away, as some shoddy diviner would do. If you want your customer to take you seriously in this work, you have to respect formality. And formality here required that I first take a bit of cotton, put some alcohol on it and briskly rub the surface of his palm with it. Although the reason for this should have been obvious, many visitors were bewildered and asked for an explanation. I gave them one, trying to make it sound as professional as possible, sprinkled with Latin words.

After having thoroughly cleaned his palm, I took a large magnifying glass with a handle and frame of imitation ivory, wiped it with a grey linen cloth, and finally looked at his palm.

Even under the magnifying glass the young man's life-line appeared quite short. I had seen other lines that suddenly stopped or branched somewhere around halfway to the base of the hand, but never one like this. It barely reached one-third of the way. If there really was something to this, my young visitor should already have met his maker. Luckily for him, it was just plain superstition. Luckily for me, that was quite widespread. Neither of us had any reason to complain.

I raised my head and looked him in the eyes. It was only then that I realized this had not been tactically wise. I should have continued calmly examining his palm as though there was nothing special on it. This way, he received confirmation that something was wrong. I quickly returned my eyes to his palm, but it was too late.

"I'm going to die soon." He said it in a soft, flat voice, as though stating an incontrovertible fact.

"Excuse me?" I asked with exaggerated surprise, not taking my eyes off what was under the magnifying glass.

"I don't have much longer to live."

"Why do you think that?"

"My lifeline."

"What about it?"

"See how short it is."

"I see. And so?"

"That means my time is almost up."

I laid the magnifying glass on the table and looked at my customer again. The calculated harshness in my eyes expressed legitimate indignation.

"My dear young man, if you know how to interpret the lines on your palm, why waste your time and money with me?"

I don't resort to this sentence very often because the occasions to use it, thank heavens, have been rather rare,

but whenever I've said it the effect has always been as expected. This time, however, the effect was missing. Judging by my visitor's face, the rebuke had made no impression at all. I would have to act even angrier.

"It's simply amazing how some people fail to realize that palm reading is a very serious and responsible craft, and not something that just anyone can do. Skill is only acquired after thorough training and long experience, and natural talent is absolutely necessary. In this respect, it is not very different from medical diagnostics. Would you interfere in a diagnostician's work?"

The young man did not reply immediately. Something seemed to be weighing on his mind. When he finally answered, he disregarded my rhetorical question. "Do you think I might live a long life?"

I sighed deeply and picked up the magnifying glass again. This seemed to have done the trick. I bent over his palm and started to examine it again. I did it slowly and meticulously, taking lots of time. With ordinary customers I stated my verdict relatively fast in order to create the impression that everything was clearly and easily readable. With such smart alecks, however, I had to do the opposite. They are only convinced if the prediction is made after exhaustive and lengthy examination.

"You will live a relatively long life," I said at last. "I guarantee at least 84.5 years, although there is a chance that you might live to 90."

Not a single customer, regardless of how distrustful they are in the beginning, has failed to light up when they hear they have decades of life before them. Sometimes there are even touching moments, with tears and sincere confessions about the dark forebodings and fears that have brought them to my parlour. Some of those who have been relieved of a particularly heavy burden have even fallen into my arms. In those moments, as I pat them on the back, I feel proud of my line of work. Gone is the guilty conscience that haunts me from time to time. What people get from me, at a modest price, is measured not by how true or honest it is, but how useful it is.

There was not even a flicker of a smile on the young man's face. "Guarantee?"

Now he had really gone too far. I had yet to encounter such ingratitude. "Of course I guarantee!" I almost shouted. "I can give it to you in writing if you want!"

My agitation didn't phase him. "But your guarantee can be easily invalidated," he said in a steady voice.

"Is that so?" His composure only fed the flames of my anger. "And please, won't you tell me just how?"

"Easily. I could kill myself."

I thought I hadn't heard correctly. "You could do what?"

"Kill myself," he repeated, as though saying something banal.

I stared at his wooden face. I had underestimated this customer. He wasn't just one of the ordinary sceptics who come in periodically. I know how to deal with them. This was quite a different case. I'd never had a visitor who mentioned suicide, nor had I heard of any such customer visiting my colleagues. The young man certainly wasn't

serious, but I still had to be careful. If anything were to happen, they might close up my shop.

"Of course you can't kill yourself," I said in a tone that restored my previous composure. "Even if you wanted to. What is clearly written on your palm would prevent you. You will die an old man, whether you like it or not. Indeed, I see no reason why that shouldn't please you."

"But I can," replied the young man. With a rapid movement he pulled his right hand from the lighted circle on the felt and stuck it between the overlapping lapels of his raincoat. A moment later he pulled it out, holding a gun. I don't understand a thing about weapons, but this one seemed serious and threatening enough in spite of its small size. He held it in front of him, the barrel turned between the two of us.

I knew I had to say something if I wanted to retain control of the situation, but try as I feverishly might, nothing coherent crossed my mind. I just stared dully at the shiny, chromium-plated metal in the visitor's hand, feeling a lump form in my throat. I had never been that close to a firearm before.

"What's stopping me?" said the young man, breaking the silence. "It's quite a simple matter." He cocked the gun with his thumb and put it next to his right temple. "All I have to do is pull the trigger."

"Wait!" finally burst out of me. I jumped halfway out of my chair.

There must have been something funny about that because the visitor's lips curved into a gentle smile. He didn't put the gun down, but his finger relaxed on the trigger.

"Why?"

"You'd kill yourself just to prove that my prophecy isn't true?" The fact that my voice was shaking certainly didn't help, but there was nothing to be done. I slowly sank back in my chair.

He hesitated a long moment and then lowered the gun into his lap, out of my sight. An audible click meant the gun was no longer cocked. A noisy sigh of relief escaped from me.

"I would kill myself to foil predestination. That's the only way I have to beat it. I've thought about it for a long time. When you're marked like I am, you don't have time for much else." He raised his hand without the gun, turned his palm towards me briefly, then put it back in his lap.

"But I told you..."

"I know what you told me," he said, cutting in. "But it's all the same, don't you see? Instead of one predetermination you offered me another. And one that is considerably longer. Isn't it enough that I've suffered for almost two decades because of what's written on my palm? Should this agony now continue into old age? You can't imagine how heavy a burden it is. I simply wouldn't be able to bear it that long. It's utterly impossible to live if you know when you will die."

Silence fell on us like a heavy shroud. Even if I hadn't been experienced at interpreting my visitors' expressions, it was easy to read what was in the young man's eyes: a suicide's firm resolve to follow through on his intention.

"But if you didn't want to find out when you will die, why did you come to my parlour?"

"I didn't come to your parlour to find out when I will die. I know that already. I came here because this is the most suitable place to kill myself. The temple of predestination. It is only here that my act will have true meaning."

"This is no temple of predestination," I said in a muffled voice, like a criminal admitting guilt when faced with incriminating evidence.

"What else is a fortune-teller's parlour?" asked the young man, knitting his brow.

"A temple of false hopes. Those who decide to visit me don't do it for the sake of truth. Somewhere deep inside them everyone is aware of that. What brings them here is the suddenly aroused awareness of their own mortality. The same that has started to haunt you much too early. Indeed, I don't offer them the eternity they would be promised if they went to church. What I sell doesn't last quite that long, and so it has less value. But there are those who would buy longevity."

"False longevity."

"False, of course. How else could it be? There is no true prediction of the future for the very reason that there is no predetermination. You are ready to raise your hand against yourself in order to beat an opponent that doesn't even exist."

"But my lifeline..." He raised his hand again, this time with the gun in it.

"Your lifeline doesn't say a thing. And neither does mine. Or anyone else's. It's all pure superstition. What is written in your palm has nothing to do with how long you will live. Right now that depends entirely upon you. You can pull that trigger and follow through on an enormous misconception. Or you can forget the whole thing and embark on an uncertain future, enjoying the very uncertainty it holds."

As I spoke these words, I tried anxiously to guess what his reaction would be. My worst fear was that he would pay absolutely no attention, finding my words false or not convincing enough, and would simply end things the way he had clearly intended when he came into my parlour. Another possibility, certainly less ominous although still very troublesome, would be to embark with me on a metaphysical discussion about predestination, waving his weapon under my nose all the while as his trump card. Curiously enough, I was least repulsed by what in any other circumstances would have appeared the most horrendous threat: that he would sue me for openly admitting that I consciously deceived my customers, even with noble intentions. That would certainly have closed down my parlour.

The young man sat there for a long time in silence, staring at me fixedly. Or maybe the time seemed long to me. Time can pass very slowly when you are waiting for something stressful. When he finally spoke, I was speechless with surprise for several moments.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"You don't owe me anything, of course."

"No, please. I have to pay." He stood up, still holding

the gun. His other hand picked up the glove on the table, then his umbrella from the back of the chair.

There was no sense arguing. How can you refuse money from a man brandishing a gun in front of you? I stated the lowest price that I keep only for special customers. This one certainly belonged in that category, so my generosity was well founded.

My visitor was suddenly in a predicament. Since both hands were full, he couldn't reach his wallet. Finally, he tucked the gun back inside his raincoat, fumbled around inside a bit, then took out his wallet. The banknote he handed me was considerably larger than the sum I'd asked for.

"I'm afraid I don't have change," I said in an apologetic voice. "If you could wait a minute, I'll go change it. Just around the corner. I'll be right back."

"There's no need to give anything back. Keep the change."

I didn't have a chance to protest because the young man made a brisk about-face and headed for the door. I thought he would leave without a word, but he stopped at the door, turned and said, "Good night."

My "good night" in return echoed in the empty parlour.

I stayed in my chair, staring blankly at the large banknote, turning it over and over between my fingers. Like a mantra, this monotonous, rustling sound helped me pull myself together. Life has taught me one thing: always look at the good side, whenever possible, even in the most difficult situations. Although the visit that had just ended had certainly been unusual and in many ways unpleasant, there had been no adverse consequences.

The most important thing, of course, was that I had prevented the young man from committing suicide, something that would have been quite detrimental to us both. He would clearly have been in a far worse situation, but I would have had my share of trouble too. If only he'd found some other reason to raise a hand against himself than just outwitting predestination! As if predestination existed; or rather, if it existed, as if it were at all possible to outwit it. A bonus was the fee. It would take at least five customers for me to earn what this visitor had left me so gallantly. And the days when that many people enter my parlour can be counted on one hand.

Finally, the incident I had just gone through started me thinking about putting in special security measures. We live in uncertain times, and additional precautions certainly couldn't hurt. Besides, I am visited by strangers who are all, without exception, burdened with troubles. Carefree, satisfied people don't go to see a clairvoyant. I'd been lucky this time, but I certainly didn't want some future customer to pull a gun on me. Maybe I should put an inconspicuous metal detector by the entrance, similar to those at airports. Provided it wasn't too expensive, of course.

I was roused from my thoughts by sharp ringing. Usually my customers barely touch the doorbell, dreading what awaits them inside, but whoever was at my door now clearly wasn't the slightest bit afraid. Judging by the insistent ringing, for some reason he must have been in

a great hurry to find out his future.

"Coming, coming," I shouted, getting up from my chair.

As I shuffled towards the door on limbs that had gone numb from sitting so long, it suddenly occurred to me that it might be the young man. He'd changed his mind and decided to do what he'd originally intended after all. Panic-stricken at this possibility, I stood there without moving, my hand on the doorknob, not knowing what to do. But the ringing simply wouldn't stop, so I finally opened the door a crack and peered into the dense mist that filled the evening.

The face I saw was not the young man's. In front of the door was a rather short, middle-aged man with a bushy beard, wearing a winter coat. I had never seen him before. His appearance, however, did not bring relief. He seemed upset, as though he'd just been through an ordeal.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said in a trembling voice, unconsciously taking off his hat, exposing his balding head. "Yours is the only light that's on. Would you mind... letting me use your telephone? It's urgent. There's been an... accident."

"Accident?" I repeated.

"Yes, here... quite close," he said, motioning vaguely towards the left. "A young man was... crossing the street... I didn't see him in the mist... I was driving slowly, of course... suddenly he popped out in front of me... out of nowhere... I didn't have time to hit the brakes... it all happened so suddenly..."

"Is he injured?" I asked, although it was unnecessary.

As an experienced clairvoyant, I had to know the answer.

"I'm afraid he's dead, ma'am. He's lying there... on the pavement... covered with blood." He raised the bloody, white shawl in his hand. "I tried to stop the bleeding with this... He died in my arms... I have to call the police..."

The police soon arrived and made an on-site inspection. There was no investigation since there was no need. It was a clear-cut case. Inattentive pedestrians periodically meet their end like that in the mist. There was nothing the driver could have done.

No one asked me anything. Why should they, anyway? I wasn't a witness to the tragic event. I didn't offer to make a statement either. What for? Why would the police be interested in what some old fortune-teller thinks about a routine traffic accident?

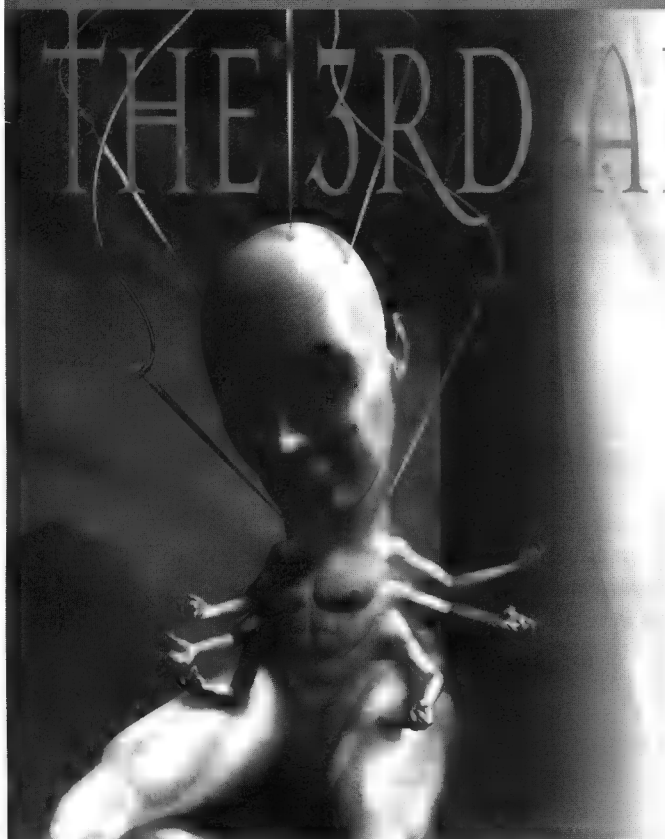
Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

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Zoran Živković, who lives in Belgrade, Serbia, last appeared in *Interzone* with "Geese in the Mist" (issue 182) and "Hole in the Wall" (issue 184). The above new piece is the third in a loose series that began with those two. Of his many books, the most recent was a slim volume of six linked stories called *Biblioteka* ("The Library," 2002), which has also appeared in English in an American anthology, *Leviathan 3*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre.

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“I didn’t *want* to go home,” she said. “Every cotton-picking one of ’em *lied* about my wanting to go home, Dr Schenck.”

A 79-year-old woman wearing pigtails and a pinafore makes an unlikely patient, but she sat gamely before me, spry as a gymnast despite her great age but high on a chronic insult that she meant to sound to the depths.

“They were the crummiest bunch a poor little gal from the country could tumble among,” she told me. “I’m lucky I survived the conniving sons of bitches.”

“You’re definitely a survivor,” I said.

“Damned straight! But *you* spend six decades working for a nutzo with straight pins and ring washers for brains. See how *you’d* fare.”

Her tendency to italicize signalled her agitation, so I probably ought not to have said, “Dot, maybe you *should* have gone home.”

“To what? Prairie hardscrabble and grinding work for the slave-holders passing themselves off as my kin? Who’d want to go home to *that*?”

“Mr Strawser says you did. Allegedly, you often said, ‘There’s no place like home.’”

“There are *hundreds* of places like the wastes I got posted to – *thousands*! Who’d voluntarily stay in one of ’em after she sees Topeka? Answer me that.”

“Mr Strawser’s associates, Tim Timberhack and Asa D. Fearing, backed him on that point, Dot. To the days of their deaths, they swore your only wish was to return to the foster parents you now insist on calumniating.”

“I’ve *always* badmouthed ’em. I always will. Just as I will Mr Strawser and his pals, the Three Stooges of Bugger, Deadlock, and Balderdash.”

“Why would you do that?” Another foul-up: *Never* ask a patient “Why?” It engenders defensiveness, sabotaging your role as ally and guide.

“They hung together to keep from hanging separately. I had – I *still* have – the goods on ’em.”

To cover my blunder I said, “Talk a little more about that.”

“At 15, corn-fed up, I ran away from Aunt and Uncle

Legree. On a main-travelled road to the Big City, I hefted my mutt Terry, hiked up my skirt, and stuck out my thumb – what a cute girl was I. The three educated dun-derheads stopped in a Studebaker coupe to give me a ride. I found out soon enough that they were all fucked up – pardon my plains-talk – a *whole* lot worse than Little Miss Dot.”

I thought, How could you flag down a carload of male strangers and assume that only good would come of it? But I waited, willing Dot to continue and waxing grateful when she obliged.

“Fearing drove, Timberhack sat beside him up front, and Strawser flopped over toward me in the back until Terry bristled and growled. Then Strawser flopped back toward his own door – a real he-man. And, like the other two smoothies, a real genius to boot.”

“What happened next?” I already knew her story from a deposition that she had given at our in-house hospital, but she would heal better, and faster, if she rehearsed and processed her ostensible trauma just as *she* recalled it.

“They claimed to be law-school grads on their way to see this big-shot corporate lawyer who owed Strawser’s old man a favour. They figured, since they’d just passed their bar exams, that this Frank Cicada fella would take them all on as associates, if not outright partners.”

“Eventually he did, didn’t he? Everyone knows Cicada, Strawser, Timberhack, & Fearing, now Cicada, Inc. It’s the most prestigious law firm in town.”

“It’s a house of cards, Dr Schenck – ha, ha, ha, and *ha!* Do you want to tell my story, or will you shut up and let me do it?”

This touched my pride. In anger and chagrin I almost stood, but resisted the impulse (for in my case it never ends well). I took a breath, begged Dot’s pardon, and urged her to resume her account of the hitchhiking.

“In the orphanage library I’d devoured psychiatric texts,” she said, “and I pegged Strawser, right off, as a hebephrenic with submerged erotic issues and the other guys, respectively, as a victim of psychomotor seizures and a manic-depressive with delusions of bestiality.”

“Timberhack and Fearing?” I could not admit that, during their lifetimes, I had conducted many private therapy sessions for both men, and that Dot’s early take on their psychoses tagged her as a natural-born diagnostician.

“Sure. I should’ve jumped right out of that Studebaker, but Strawser said this buddy of his daddy’s, Mr Cicada, would give ’em cushy jobs, and he’d certainly find something for a swell filly like me too. I liked that. No more milking at four a.m., or chicken plucking, pump priming, pig slopping, or corn shucking at *any* time.”

“Clearly, the answer to your prayers. But things didn’t go as you would have wished.”

“*There’s* an understatement. Strawser was a piece of work – shoddy work in a cheap blue suit. Even in the car he sported a frat-boy boater and smoked like a steel-manufacturing plant. Wouldn’t light his own Lucky Strikes. Said the nicotine stains on his fingers would ignite if he ever struck a match, but wouldn’t carry a lighter because its tug in his trouser pocket irked him. Timberhack lit his

cigarettes for him, leaning into the backseat using this swank Zippo as if it were part of his own stiff hand. (I figured poor Timberhack had arthritis.) Smoke swirled in that Studebaker, and when I coughed and fanned it with my hand, to hint that I didn’t like it, Strawser waved it back at me with his boater. Maybe I’m allergic to your smoke, I said. He said, You need one of your own to fight the allergy and build up your body’s defences. He stuck one in my mouth. Before Timberhack could Zippo it, I took it out. Strawser used his cigarette’s burning butt to fence with my fresh Lucky Strike – a really goosey move. Ashes dropped in my lap and burned my skirt. Terry bristled and set up a howl. Strawser whimpered and hugged his door, not because of Terry but because of the growing hole in my skirt. I put it out with the heel of my hand, while Strawser held his boater over his face to keep from having to watch. Please smother it, he said, before the fire consumes the woof-’n-warp preserving your modesty, Miss Gage. I remember that word for word – it was such a goddamned *weird* thing to say.”

“Hardly the utterance of the future chief of Cicada, Inc. What else did Mr Strawser do?”

In some irritation Dot said, “Hang on a sec. I’m getting to that. I looked in the rearview mirror up front, and Asa D. Fearing, our designated chauffeur, had closed his eyes! The dingbat was *driving* and he’d *closed his eyes!*”

“That sounds scary,” I said.

“Timberhack had to punch Fearing in the arm to keep us from running into a ditch. I’m all right, you imbeciles! Fearing roared, making Terry cower, and he yanked us back in the road, all indignant that anybody aboard should suppose him unfit to drive. He’d gone incredibly shaky, though, and soon after this hullabaloo he pulled us into a roadside mom-and-pop filling station with a shingled overhang and lots of grease in the dust by its clock-faced pumps.”

“What happened at the station?”

“Fearing took care of the Stupidbaker. Strawser opened the trunk and rummaged out some twiggy stuff in a paper bag – wacky tobacky, he said. (Hey, I was an orphan farm girl, barely 15, what did I know?) He made Timberhack and me go around back with him, among some oil drums facing a stand of cottonwoods and a few goofy cows. With buggy eyeballs he rolled what he told me were top-grade Central American reefers. He and his pal drew on the crimped things like guys siphoning gas from someone else’s Buick. They gave me one too. The sickly sweet smell made the hebephrenic Strawser even loopier, and I got a little that way myself. Timberhack, though – he went weird, as if the cows out there really scared him. I mean, he just shut down. The stink of his reefer triggered a psychomotor epileptic seizure, and he froze like a stove-up machine.”

My patient, whom I regarded almost filially as Dot Gage (rather than as Ms Gage or even Miss Dorothy), paused and stared at a petite pair of silver ballet slippers belonging to my daughter, which I kept by a mahogany photo block on my desk. Her reverie lengthened.

“Dot,” I said. “Dot, you still with me?”

“Strawser leaned over and nuzzled my neck. It startled me so much that I didn’t even react. He took my dullness

for consent. He slung me around, bent me over an oil barrel, raised my skirts, dragged down my bloomers, and lifted his tally-whacker to my bottom. One of the heifers mooed, but I didn't so much as squeak. This had happened to me before – at the orphanage, at the Legrees' place, nigh on to every-damned-where, Dr Schenck. It didn't shock me half as much as the wacky weed, which I mostly smoked to thumb my nose at the goody-two-shoes everybody *wanted* me to be." In her antique eyes shone the poignant vulnerability of her younger self.

Of course, I also saw her younger self's defenceless posterior, and I said, "So he rammed his tally-whacker right into your furbelow?"

Dot blinked. "What the *hell* did you just say?"

"Nothing. Please go on."

After briefly regarding me with manifest scepticism, Dot said, "The goon had no starch. Maybe the wacky weed did him in. He stayed at it, though, trying to use a zinnia stem for a plumber's snake. In fact, it started to seem funny in a skuzzy sort of way. I may've even laughed. Once or twice I heard Terry bark. Then Timberhack awoke, got a gander at what his buddy wasn't quite managing, and clicked back off, like a light with a timer switch. It took Fearing blundering through the stickers and sunflowers to break up the attempted rape, which he did by throwing Strawser against the wall and ordering him to tuck himself in. Are you hurt, Miss Gage? Fearing asked, and I thought, At last, an honest-to-God gentleman. When we got back to the coupe, though, Terry was missing. When I asked Fearing, who'd dragged his pals along by their elbows, what had happened, he admitted that bowwows made him nervous and that he'd given Terry to a socialite in an ivory Packard. You did *what*, you mangy oaf? I shouted. He handed me a sweaty green bill. Here, he said, she gave me a sawbuck for the little prick. *Strawser* has the little prick! I raged, and the filling-station couple shuffled outside to see about the rumpus I had started. Or *Fearing* had started. (About damned time they showed some interest in the goings-on around their little bailiwick.) Anyway, Strawser tipped his hat, and he and Timberhack manhandled me into the car while Fearing made nice, paid for the gas, and got us the hell out of there. I was bawling, not so much for my inept unscrewing as for the loss of my beloved Terry. That loss haunts me to this day. Terry surely died some 50 years ago, but because he just vanished, I've always sort of believed he'd one day reappear. You know?"

"Yes, Dot, I know." I shifted in my chair. "Do you wish you'd escaped your uncouth travelling companions at the filling station?"

"Sure. I didn't like even one of them. Who would? A rapist, even if he was a limp dick; a see-no-evil epileptic, for his own convenience; and an opportunistic dog-a-phobic chauffeur. Three such losers don't often come along. But Strawser, talking to smooth things over, said that Mr Cicada would take care of us. He nigh on to promised me a job and said he'd never touch me again unless *I* wanted him to. When I looked at him in angry amazement, he raised his hands like Eddie Cantor and massaged the air

to hold me at bay – just joking around. I sank into my corner and cried. Finally, I drifted off and dreamed of fried link sausages and steaming buckwheat cakes."

"But, ultimately, things didn't turn out well for you?"

"No they didn't. Or maybe they did. We got to the city and Fearing wheeled us up to an ivy-blanketed house surrounded by a lawn dotted with willows, elms, sycamores, and maples. So many trees and so much green that Timberhack roused and gawked out his window like a termite on a lumberyard tour. Mr Cicada saw all four of us. He took the men first of course, hired 'em straightaway, and put Scharlach Strawser, the son of a big-city judge Cicada'd gone to university with, on the firm's leadership-preferment fast track. Then he *bought* the stooges' Studebaker, told me to hop in, and carried me out for a test spin. How old are you, Miss Gage? Eighteen, I lied. And for what position do you think you qualify here at Cicada & Associates, young lady? If I *must* work, either law clerk or administrative secretary, I said. He chuckled and laid his hand on my thigh. Well, you can have them both, honey, and, believe you me, you'll flat-out work your sweet virgin patootie off. At a furious clip he drove me around the winding roads on his law firm's grounds and past all the greenery in a humongous park. Then he turned me out in front of Cicada & Associates' offices and squealed away into the sunset."

"He abandoned the firm?"

"Sort of, but not exactly. Mr Cicada remained our nominal head. He travelled all over, showed up for strategy meetings, telephoned with case suggestions, recruited new business, and popped in for surprise inspections of our files and billing logs. Actually, Dr Schenck, he was a real pain in our severe old-timer patooties. Day to day, though, Scharlach Strawser ran things, or pretended to, to the great gloom of the old hands, with Timberhack and Fearing in subsidiary positions of higher rank than those of the attorneys who'd toiled here for years. None of them folks much liked us."

"And what did *you* do, Dot?"

"Everything. My jealous three stooges had all wanted to send me home, or at least away, but Mr Cicada wouldn't let 'em. So I stayed and ran the place. At least by 16 or 17 I ran the place. I lined up corporate cases, plotted our arguments, took depositions, assisted in court, billed our defendants, and filed appeals. Everyone in-house thought Strawser had *his* hand on the voltage lever, but he couldn't shoo a pigeon off a window ledge without instructions, and once, when he hit on me in old Cicada's leather-paneled library, I smacked him plumb silly. He whirled across the room like a wet clump of confetti in a croker sack. Which didn't stop the birdbrain from exposing himself or putting a move on me every couple of weeks or so, but always to the same bruising confusion. I put up with that crap for years – hell, for decades – while Strawser got all the glory."

"Didn't you ever think of defecting to a competing firm?"

"I couldn't. I had no degree. I got lodging and board in Cicada & Associates' offices instead of pay. Timberhack told me that if I tried to sign with another firm, he'd freeze me here by denouncing me to the legal authorities

as a fraud. Hey, I was only a 17- or 18-year-old farm girl, what did I know?"

"So you ran Cicada & Associates from 1939 to 1953, and then Cicada, Strawser, Timberhack, & Fearing from 1953 to 1981, and finally Cicada, Inc., from late 1981 to whenever, for nothing more than room and board and the day-to-day avoidance of a fraud prosecution?" My question verged on the perilous, but I tried to undercut the danger by adding, "No wonder you feel that Strawser and his partners victimized you." And then I blurted, "But couldn't you have appealed to Mr Cicada himself, during one of his pop-in visits?"

Dot crossed her hammocky arms and squinted at me. "Dr Schenck, have you ever thought about the relation of names to the stuff that they name?"

Bewildered, I crossed my own arms and squinted back.

"For instance, *Schenck* is very close to *shrink*, isn't it, and shrinking your clients' neuroses is what you, *Dr Schenck*, do for a living."

I thought this an impertinent linkage, but professionally held my peace.

"It works even better for Frank Cicada," Dot said. "Give me a synonym for each of our founders' names, the Christian and the family."

Letting clients dictate the direction of their analysis, especially when they veer into irrelevancy, goes against my training, but at this stage in our lopsided dialogue I thought it crucial to humour Dot and so I said, "*Frank* is another word for *candid*, and a cicada is an insect."

"An insect best known for what?"

"Well," I said, considering, "for making a high-pitched drone in the trees or the weeds. Is that what you had in mind?"

"Sure," Dot said. "A cicada is an insect that makes a high-pitched drone. Okay. I'll buy that. Which makes Frank Cicada what, exactly?"

Maybe I had let the game get out of hand. If you don't know where a patient intends to take a guessing game seemingly irrelevant to her analysis and treatment, better to squelch the game before you end up looking a fool. (On the other hand, Freud has taught that nothing is irrelevant, and that foolishness may run before perception.) So I said, "I have no idea."

"A candid humbug," Dot announced triumphantly.

After an anxious beat or two I said, "And what does *that* mean?"

"Old Cicada *knew* nothing. He could *do* nothing. By sheer bumbling luck he'd risen to his level of highest, irreversible incompetence, and when Strawser, Timberhack, and Fearing appeared, he was only too happy to turn everything over to 'em – actually, to *me*. He was a humbug, Dr Schenck, a total and utter humbug."

"And how was he candid?"

"He *admitted* as much."

"To you?"

"To me, and only to me. So I guess you could argue that his frankness didn't jump all that far or reach very deep, but I appreciated how he'd chosen me for the honour of his candour. Whenever he returned to Cicada, Inc.'s offices, he told me how well the firm was doing and what pride he

took in my efforts. He had houses in Topeka, Tahiti, Barbados, Winnipeg, Nice, Prague, Perth, Singapore, and Ponte Vedra Beach because of me. His influence – his humbuggery – kept Little Dot Gage in the saddle."

"And then he died."

Dot tugged at a greying pigtail. "Yes, in 1994, at age 89. As soon as word reached the stooges, things began to change. I was 70, past the firm's age of mandatory retirement. Even though Strawser and his pals were seven or eight years older, they confined me to my room here in Cicada, Inc.'s main offices and wrested day-to-day control from me. Everybody knows what happened then. They got too big for their britches. They went online, began selling stock, and sought only what the media call 'high-profile cases' – defending Briggs Tobacco against dying smokers, Remorseless Motors against auto-crash paraplegics, Over-the-Rainbow Annuities against insider-trading allegations, and Global Moguls Worldwide against charges of accounting fraud and wrongful pension disenfranchisement. Timberhack handled most of our serious bushwhacking, setting up a distracting whine that resonated for seven years. If the boys hit a snag, they slunk in to me and coerced my advice with threats of limiting my Internet access or reducing the size of my soy-dog servings, and my advice won them the day. I learned, quite late, that Strawser had taken over Mr Cicada's various houses – to add on carports, natatoriums, and multi-story arts centres – and that Timberhack had cut more fancy corners than a pair of new pinking shears. I didn't know that Fearing, even palsy-stricken, had cooked our books hotter than, uh, a pepper sprout. You can't cheat an honest man, the saying goes, but when you catch a few in trusting aggregations, they fall faster than balsa-wood dominoes, and finally Timberhack confessed his and everybody else's malfeasance. After which, I understand, Cicada, Inc., stopped droning – in a neck-snapping hurry."

"And, I take it, you consider your knowledge of in-house corruption the 'goods' that you have on your associates?"

"Sure," Dot said. "But so what? On the day of his pending arrest, Timberhack initiated a psychomotor seizure in a busy downtown intersection and wound up plastered to the grille of a furniture truck – a suicide, pure and simple. As for Asa D. Fearing, he wore an antique raccoon coat to the zoo and flopped over the guardrail at Monkey Island. Rhesus monkeys into which university primatologists had injected flying squirrel DNA swept down and asphyxiated Fearing under a heavy mantle of furry wings – in my book, another suicide. At least the larcenous bastards had the decency to recognize their shame and to do something semi-atoning – if, of course, they weren't just avoiding punishment." Dot mulled this qualification. "You can't pass that over as a motive."

"And Strawser?"

At that moment, as if on cue, the door to my office opened, and Strawser wedged himself through it behind a lightweight titanium-alloy walker. He stumped to the centre of the room, equidistant between Dot and me, and balanced there in an unstylish blue suit and an old-fashioned frat-boy boater. He looked anachronistically old, admonitorily frail. But he had every right. Just a month

or so ago he had undergone a dodecatuple bypass, with a pair of valve replacements. Even from my chair I could hear his reconditioned heart heroically thumping. I stood to acknowledge his entrance, if a little slowly for his taste. He stared down with a smirk of hebephrenic scorn, and I prayed – in my signature mechanical way – that he would refrain from embarrassing either Dot or me. After all, only his surgery and his on-sufferance recuperation had kept him from going directly to jail.

"Ah," Dot said. "If it isn't the old softie himself."

"She's finished her session with you, Meinhardt," Strawser told me. Then he spoke to my client: "Ms Gage, you may now go back home."

"Home?"

"To your room, I mean. Your pillow-padded rehabilitation room."

"That *isn't* my home!" Dot said. "I've *never* wanted to go there, any more than I ever wanted to return to the Legrees! I made this entire *building*, this *whole incorporate firm*, my dwelling – not the cell you've stuck me in as you await assignment to a cell of your own!" At some point during this rant, Dot got to her feet, wringing her hands before her ill-pressed pinafore. She glared at Strawser hatefully.

I stepped back, one graceless step. "Please, Dot, calm down. You won't –"

"Dr Schenck, butt the *hell* out. Go take another hit of hydrogen. Hoist yourself up by your own darling suspenders."

These commands touched my pride, but I never

flinched. Strawser spoke into the mike under his collar, and two men in silver-grey jumpers and mirrored glasses entered and seized Dot by the arms. Their lenses reflected the soothing green of the trees out the window at my back. They carried Dot to the door, then swung about and exited. Their captive's feet pedalled several inches off the floor, but not quite so many as mine would have done.

I hurried to reprocess and store everything that had happened during this session, for I knew what would happen next. I instantly reviewed my performance, cringing at my why question and my one mortifying crudity, remembering with a twinge that I had no daughter and never would, and twiggling to the provocative fact that I liked my default "home" no more than Dot Gage liked hers. Then another attendant entered, picked me up, and set me in my chair; and Strawser, twirling a finger in the air, said, "*Dr Schenck, please shut down.*"

Michael Bishop appeared in the last issue of *Interzone*, number 184, writing as "Philip Lawson" in collaboration with Paul Di Filippo. Prior to that his previous *Interzone* contributions (both rather a long time ago) were "The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services Consortium Ltd (issue 12) and "Sequel on Skorpios" (issue 134). He lives in Pine Mountain, Georgia, USA, and has written many fine novels and story-collections.

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2066 and All That

THE ENGLISH STRIKE BACK OR THE CABURN SURPRISE

Juliet Eyeions & Paul Brazier

In 2066, the European Union decided to take back the British Isles.

The English, being bolshy, had decided they didn't want to play any more when the Brussels Krauts extended the EU eastward in order to allow Turkey and Uzbekistan to play in the European Cup. England thought this was a Bad Thing, because it meant England might not be Top Nation any more. So England filled in the big hole near Folkestone to stop people training for Paris, and made holes in all the boats that tried to sail in The Channel, and did funny bendy things to the wings of aeroplanes that tried to fly over them so that the aeroplanes could only just fly home before their wings fell off completely.

Of course, this made the Irish and the Welsh and the Scotch extremely angry, because they knew they could beat Turkey and Uzbekistan (and England, too, probably, even if it was only in brackets and in their dreams). But they didn't have any choice, because the big hole was in England, and it *was* called the *English* Channel after all, and anyway England was still the Top Nation in the British Isles, even if it had given autonomy to every bit of the country, even the bits that didn't already have a name.

So, as we said, in 2066 the Europeans decided to Do Something about the English Question. They asked around until they found someone who thought he knew how to do it. His name was Guillaume d'Orange, also known as the Conquerer because he looked like General De Gaulle.

Guillaume created a huge army on the north shore of France (which is the sticky-out bit of Europe just under

England on the map). Then he got hold of some huge car ferries and petrol tankers that the English hadn't yet made holes in, put his army into them, and sailed them across the channel to Pevensey. This was his First Big Mistake. Everyone knows that the only successful way to invade England is through Thanet.¹ Everyone except Guillaume, that is.

His Second Big Mistake was to try to follow the railway to London. He didn't want to have to change at Hastings and go via Tonbridge. He had an ancestor who had tried that ploy successfully,² and he thought the English might be wise to it. So he used the direct service that goes via Lewes and Haywards Heath. He wasn't aware that the Victorian English engineers that built the railways didn't care much where they went, as long as it was fairly flat. So all the railways run along the bottom of valleys, and get flooded very easily. And it wasn't Guillaume's fault that it was the wettest summer and autumn since the Great Flood of Lewes in the year 2000. But the upshot was that by Christmas 2066, his entire army was bogged down around the village of Beddingham in the flood plain just south and east of Lewes.

Of course, the English hadn't been idle while he had been invading them. They saw the sense of avoiding a fight while he wore himself out battling the mud. And they had their secret weapon. So they evacuated everyone from the path of the invading army, and made sure that there were plenty of sheep left in the fields.

Guillaume was frustrated. Lewes sat before him, a fat,

inviting target. But try as he might he couldn't get his army through this last quagmire to the higher ground around the castle. Its defenders, bonfire boys defiant to the last of any form of authority, had refused to be evacuated and instead taunted the immired Eurarmy from their castle every day.

On Christmas Day 2066, the tide was finally turned. England's president by now was Arthur Harold. He was grandson of an esteemed snooker champion, and for his thatch of corn-blond hair and his habit of being overconcerned about the fate of all soldiers under his command, he was known as the Golden Worrier. On this day, he ordered the final humiliation of the Eurarmy.

The day dawned bright and clear. As the Eurarmy shook out of their tents, they found the heights of the Downs surrounding them lined with menacing figures. To the south, Itford Hill was taller than before. To the north, Caburn's brow had sprouted a new height. Guillaume was hastily roused by his valet, Heimlich, and came to the door of his Winnebago in a silk dressing gown. Putting binoculars to his eyes, he saw, lining the hilltops overlooking his army, standing stock still, The Sheep.

He had never heard of The Caburn Attack Sheep. Of course, now, their name has now gone down in history, but then, even the English weren't entirely sure whether or not they were a myth. He *had* heard of the Fairlight Flamingoes. They had moved into Fairlight lagoon in the late 2030s when the climate had changed so markedly, and he knew that English nanite technology had turned them into a potent reconnaissance force. He had seen them fly by daily, and accepted their presence. It was pointless shooting at them. There were just too many. At this moment, indeed, the air darkened to a remarkable shade of pink as what appeared to be the whole colony passed overhead, glowing in the early morning sunlight. And The Sheep Looked On.

Shaken, Guillaume turned back into his Winnebago to get his morning coffee – as a child he had seen the pictures of the Saxons at Senlac,³ standing defiant atop their hill before an earlier army – but his valet shouted from outside, “The Sheep! The Sheep!” (although it may have been “Les Moutons” or “Os Carneiros” or “Die Schafe” – who knows what language a Euro speaks). He turned back, looked out of the door at the surrounding swamp and saw nothing unusual – except his valet, gesticulating wildly and shouting, “The Sheep! Look Up!”

He leaned out of the door and was amazed to see the sky filled, no longer with flamingoes, but with sheep parascending on bright red and green parachute aerofoils. One glance at the hilltops told him the grim truth.

The sheep were streaming over the hilltop, their fleece trailing out and transmogrifying behind them, and as they raced down the steep slopes the fleece became parafoils that quickly filled with air, so that now they spiralled high above his army.

He called immediately for anti-aircraft fire, but fingers already tensed around triggers relaxed as the airborne sheep, now divisions strong, circled and rose in the thermals created by his massed manpower. It became plain, in the still rising sunlight, that they presented no threat. Against the painfully blue sky, their red and green wings flashed and sparkled as they turned and spiralled upwards. The occasional “Wheeee!” could be heard drifting down to the ground. Many common expressions were coined during this campaign, and “whee like sheep” is

one that was in fact prefigured in the work of another great Englishman, the composer Handel.

As the massed airborne sheep attained some altitude, the whees gave way to more concerted bleating. No amount of disencryption could tell Guillaume what was being said, although it was plain it was some kind of code. Soon enough, it became plain that they were using their baa-code to organize their formation. Of a sudden, the random swirling of red and green gave way to a concentrated formation – and in the skies above Mount Caburn, parascending sheep spelled out in perfect formation the timeless message,

“Peace on Earth! Goodwill to All Men!”

The Fairlight Flamingoes reappeared from the East, and their formation formed the shape of Santa Claus in his sled being drawn by reindeer, but in the head of the Santa Claus they carried Arthur Harold, the Golden Worrier himself, and as they flew by overhead, he dispensed clusters of gifts by tiny parachutes to the enmired army below. Miniature mince pies, tots of rum warmed by their own nanite furnaces, and mobile phones so they could ring home to their families rained down. And then the sheep formation dispersed and they swooped in to land in among the army, and as their feet touched the ground so their canopies enfolded them and when they stood up they were attractive young humans who would help to catch the descending gifts and feed them to the invaders, and there was much laughing and fraternizing.

Unfortunately for Guillaume, this was where he made his Last Big Mistake. One of the mince pies was a little stale. As a result its parachute didn't open properly. As he stood with his mouth agape watching the aerial display above, this mince pie hit him squarely in the mouth and caused him to gag and choke. If it hadn't been for Heim-



Photograph: Paul Brazier

lich, things might have turned out very badly for him. But as a result of his batman's manoeuvre, he survived to be invalided away from the battlefield and back to France, where he dined out during a long and happy life on the story of the one time that he ate English food and how it nearly did for him.

Without their leader, the army had no further stomach for battle, and, indeed, they really rather liked the rum and mince pies, and many of them decided to stay on and settle down with the happy young people who had waylaid them as sheep at what became famous as The Battle of Caburn Surprise, where the might of obdurate Europe was stymied and finally absorbed by the efficacy of the enterprising English.

As a direct result, the English, long Top Nation in the British Isles, became once again Top Nation in Europe, and as this was the third time, they got to keep the trophy forever, and no one ever tried to invade England again.

Harold, the Golden Worrier, being Top Man in the Top Nation, became Top Man in all of Europe. As Europe had continued to gobble up its neighbours while England had been away, now England became the Top Nation in all the world again. Harold got to do lunch with the Top Men of other countries, and they begged and pleaded that he would never set the Caburn Attack Sheep on them. So he never had to.

A vast peace settled over the world, and after a long and happy life making peace wherever he went, Harold died happy and fulfilled, at home in Hastings. By his

own request, he was buried on the cliffs above his home town, and a stone with this inscription was raised to his memory –

*By no will but his own, rests Harold here;
Still guardian of the shore and of the sea.⁴*

A detachment of Sheep is assigned there as an honour guard. And, when they're not soaring on the updraft from the cliffs, they busy themselves keeping the grass short – a task to which they seem to have become remarkably well adapted...

Footie notes

- 1 cf. Sellar, W.C and Yeatman, R.J., *1066 And All That*.
- 2 Known as "The Battle of Hastings", it was fought at a place called Senlac, now known as Battle to avoid confusing it with Hastings which isn't nearby.
- 3 See note 2
- 4 A far better written story, *The Golden Warrior* (1948) by Hope Muntz, ends with similar poignant words. But it's not as funny.

Juliet Eyeions is the wife of **Paul Brazier**, but she likes her own name more. Their Christmas stories have developed into something of a tradition over the years and recently their settings have become much more localized. "They're genuine collaborations," says Paul. "She comes up with these strange ideas and I write them down." The idea for this tale came during a walk over Mount Caburn in April 2002 while the Glynde parascending club was in action; the photograph was taken during that same walk. Previous (and future) stories can be found at www.planet-brazier.com

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Little Watcher



Brett Davidson

The Redoubt is riddled. It is infested with questions, and, worse, it is offering answers. Image casts from the Watchers and lesser beings of the Night Land have transgressed the Electric Circle and are imprinting themselves in the walls, while down in the libraries the aperiodic tiles are showing strange symmetries.

In the ceiling above his bed, Pallin observes the scrolling of the day's reports as he awakes. In City Two Hundred and Ninety-Three, named Scent, a rose on one of its famous vines bloomed not in its usual blue, but a deep red. A Scholar confirmed that this was an archaic style while an examining Eugenicist ruled out simple atavism. In a hall of City Three Hundred and Nine, named Storr, folds suggestive of an eye were seen to emerge in the metal wall. It opened. In City Eight Hundred and Eighty-One, named K, a mouth opened in a wall and spoke the word, "Odradek."

All of these manifestations were promptly destroyed of course, though there will inevitably be more.

This is how it happens, Pallin thinks, philosophically. He can read these signs: that task is the very *raison*

d'être of his order. He knows where they have come from by their style and their tone, he knows that today he will direct an inquiry at their source. The notation of a horror that has been present for generations now has become a ritual of reassurance to him. Everyone thinks more or less the same, he is sure, and it is perhaps even a justification.

He swings his stiff legs out of his bed and rises to dress himself. Though by scar and rank he could call a servant to aid him, he was a Watchman once, and refuses to do so. He polishes the silver gorget of the Watch, paying particular attention to the sigil, a woman's face of peculiar symmetry and calm, wreathed in serpents so coiled that it seems to be nestled in the petals of a rose. He puts it on over his Monstruwacan purple.

Elsewhere, nearby, his charge Kore also wakes. She does not read. Her chaperone knocks at her chamber door.

As Pallin eats his breakfast of winter fruits and cereals, he maps out the day's programme in his mind. The reports will be directed to a Scholastic librarian whom he has been cultivating, and in the meantime he and

Kore will see what obliquely informative act of treason they can commit.

He rises from his table and checks himself before a mirror. He has his vanities and admits to them as such, and in so doing he knows how to use them best. It is his duty to impress, because Kore must have confidence in him in order to perform her tasks well, and the pleasure that he feels in reciprocation sustains his further efforts. When Kore is presented to him that morning, she will see a tall man, the famous sole survivor of the last patrol Outside. She will see that he was handsome once but is now aging and wounded by his experiences, which only serves to give him an aura of hard-won wisdom. He has a limp, but rather than dragging a weak leg, he hooks a thumb in his belt, straightens his bad knee and swings with his steps so that instead he has an almost casual swagger. He knows she will think that she sees through his manner and will feel at once respectful and at ease with him. Simply, it pleases him that he pleases her.

There is a knock at his door and he leaves, almost smiling.

Kore has now appeared at the antechambers of the Tower of Observation. There she relates her dreams to the monitor Monstruwacan, who listens to the counterpoint of her mind's melody as she does so. He then signs the daily certificate of presentment to assure Master Pallin that nothing has invaded her sleep to put them all at risk as she looks upon the Land. Her chaperone Hecane, herself a senior Lady of the guild, signs with him.

The Tower of Observation is nearly ruined and empty now. Rising more than eight miles above the Night Land, it is the most exposed extremity of the senescent arcology, but crucial instruments still operate, and some must by necessity be used only here rather than in the body of the arcology itself, no matter what corruptions are already creeping there. All risk is relative, after all.

Pallin is almost the last to arrive at his post, which is at one of the highest levels still operating. He is proud to see his team of assistants and apprentices, the Watchmen with their shining diskoi, the doctor and the others, all standing in their ranks as he enters. Formal gestures and salutes are made in the manner appropriate to each guild and subsection; all is confirmed in readiness for his inspection, and this done, he is satisfied. He, Master Monstruwacan Pallin ex Asphodelos, is the last, aging hero of the Redoubt. He is their leader, their guide, their talisman.

He opens the wallet that he has carried with him and unfolds the day's plan from within. He reads aloud, informing his staff of his requirements, their object of inquiry, the instruments to be activated, the spectral windows to be opened, the radiations to be registered. He does not tell them of the reasons for his selection, as he never must. While no one would think to betray him, everyone who looks into the Land lets slip a little of themselves in doing so. The less that is known, the less there is that is lost.

The briefing done, he does not take his seat yet, but

waits, facing the door. On time to the second, as he has made it clear must always be the case, the door opens and Kore is presented by her chaperone. Hecane presents Kore's certificate, receives in turn Pallin's formal assurance that she may leave the girl in his charge, and departs.

Kore, who watches the Land most closely, is told the least of all. Before him, she makes a small, slightly odd figure, with the disconcerting red irises of her gene line. She smiles, hoping that he is reassured, but she seems slightly haggard and he detects something just a little out of true in her consciousness. Pallin's spyglass room awes her too much and she tries too hard at times. Surely she is well; her dreams have been certified.

As usual, Pallin feels a twinge of paternal concern despite their gestures. Her courage is heartbreaking. These seers, these living spyglasses, are by necessity taken from their parents at a young age and kept carefully isolated from the society of the Redoubt where they are given little knowledge, much skill, and great risk. Her parents still live, but they see less of them than he himself does and in effect he and the Lady Hecane both supersede her parents and are guiltily beholden to them. He holds his palm out to her, quashing his doubts before she can read them, and leads her to her cradle before the oval of the central spyglass screen.

Kore closes her eyes for a few moments and begins her breathing exercises. Silence is maintained as the machines are powered up and her own pulse slows. The Watchmen drop the beavers of their helmets, their fingers flexing about the grips of their diskoi, though their real weapons are more subtle and effective.

Pallin takes his own position in a tandem seat immediately behind her and signals to the orienteers to turn the room in its orbit about the Tower to point directly at its target, the Watcher of the South. It is the largest, nearest and most powerful of the Watchers, and it is the most fascinating.

Slowly, in sequence, the room revolves, filters are raised and Kore recites the stilling chant quietly to herself so that the face she presents to the immense, powerful force of the Watcher's gaze will be perfectly smooth, featureless and transparent. So skilled is she, this will almost be so.

The controllers peer at their own screens, deliberately shielded from the central display. Only Kore can bear its sight and even Pallin does not look directly, but watches with his inner sight her state of mind. He will direct her like an extension of himself, and she will feed her focused perceptions to him, a sentient lens for his own interpretive mind. Should she crack, he will throw the shutters down, calm her, save her. This is a particularly risky assignment, he knows, but the latest image casts, by their orientation and manner, smack of this Watcher in particular. Permitting himself a trivializing emotional analogy, he would say that it had something like wit, and he is intensely curious as to why this should be so.

The observations begin obliquely and they scan the geoglyphs patterning the landscape around the Watcher first, noting their spread and increasing coherence, how

they intensify and knot together around the body of the beast. The thing might almost be consciously writing something on the Land, or else compelling some sort of crystallization. Pallin tends towards the latter interpretation. It is in the nature of the Watchers for their very presence to alter that which lies around them, hardly needing a deliberate intent for exegesis. They seem to be discrete universes in their own right, with localized physical laws which by their concentration overpower any others.

It is astonishing that the Redoubt has been able to withstand the Watchers' direct sight for so many millions of years, but the sheer ordered mass of humanity contained and concentrated within must have been, with its own rigidly disciplined sense of ontology, an even stronger defence than the Electric Circle, the Air Clog, the armour plate and the other physical defences of the pyramid. Now, with the Earth Current at last fading and the population in gradual but real decline, that power is weakening and the Watchers are creeping nearer. This one in particular is starting to see within, its sight leaving traces such as those that were reported to him this morning.

The scan nears the flank of the beast, skirting the faintly phosphorescent shards of the Broken Dome that lie in its wake. It has no edge as such, no recognizable limbs. Barely beneath the upper darkness, it seems to rise out of the Night Land like a hill more than a sitting entity, and to move through it in a slow wave rather than a crawl. The labyrinthine geoglyphs trail in its millennial wake like complex turbulence. What semblance of a face it has derives largely from its eyes, and they may well be simply a reflection of its own perceptions of the humanity that so fascinates it rather than inherent features.

Yes, Pallin thinks, there is a strange dialogue between us, isn't there? You see us, and unravel us, remake us, and yet we may do the same to you. Do you see us as one great, hot hive-beast? Are you drawn to us like a moth to a light that will destroy you, or are you feeding already? Unfortunately all observations tend to support the latter explanation, but they do not strictly contradict the first. He hopes that he will eventually be certain of one thing more than its increasing nearness and the vulnerability of his own position.

The day draws on and Kore is ready now to observe the face of the thing itself. She will look into its eyes for only seconds, a time set to be automatically curtailed no matter what she might or might not see. The Watchmen activate the higher levels of the automatic defences and Pallin sets the timer for the spyglass's shutters.

Kore stares at the shrouded screen and her body stiffens. Physical readouts register shifts in her skin conductivity, fluctuations in her core temperature, a change in mode in her brainwave patterns and emergent disorder in her heart rate. A pacemaker overrides the extremes of the latter. Words of commentary flow almost like glossolalia from her mouth, broken by gasps and yet with a strange, almost affectionate sing-song tone. Pallin frowns. "I see, of course I see," she croons, "I see its eyes,

the shards of the dome, yet woven, unwinding, raddling, infesting... No, hands fluttering, weave too within it? No, not within it, before it... oh, I do not see, no I do not see, it stands before, its hands spread like delicate white flowers, that brow, those orbits, those eyes, my eyes, Little Watcher, why do you bar me from its sight? Why, when you are not even here? Oh, no, I will not, won't I? I have not, I was not. Why do you stand sideways? Why do you not stand here? I have not counted sideways..."

Plainly something is awry and he shuts down the observation before the timer even reaches the end of its brief cycle. The Watchmen tense and the doctors run to Kore, but she waves them away. He looks into her mind himself and finds her cultivated stillness shattered and a deep, deep exhaustion, but nothing else that seems to be seriously wrong. This in itself is enough to raise his suspicions, as to even read the geoglyphs emanating from a Watcher can be harrowing in ways that are not always immediately apparent. If his conscious mind did not tell him so, his instincts would warn that something is seriously amiss. He orders an immediate and total end to the day's observation. Better a fiasco than a tragedy.

"What happened?" he asks her, when the two of them have been sequestered away in a private chamber back in the putative safety of the Redoubt.

"I don't know," she says. "I didn't see the Watcher, I know that. I saw something else."

"You said, 'Little Watcher.' An emanation of the Watcher? An extension, like yourself looking out from the body of the Redoubt?"

"I don't know."

The poor girl is almost in tears, not for fear of what she has seen, but because she feels that she has let him down. This is his fault: he has been too good an example. She should see him fail a few more times – it will lessen the shock of her own coming adulthood.

He does the best he can to reassure her, probably compounding his error, and dispatches her to the care of Hecane. Alone, he steeple his fingers and does not touch his wine. He senses that some new phase has begun. Spreading a hand across the surface of his table, he summons an update on the day's reports. The image casts, he notes, are almost of a sort that could be called familiar, though he is not complacent. Some of the voices seemed to argue, though their dispute is incomprehensible. "Mal-lold!" said one mouth, "Sief, Sief!" said another, apparently accusing their listeners or each other of obscure crimes. He notes these words in the hope of finding some connection at a later date.

Turning to the records of Kore's dream, he is shocked.

She describes her dream as well as she can. At first there is darkness, which then reddens. It has a depth to it, she is sure. There is a sheen about it that recalls wine, or honey or blood. Then there is the appearance of a more solid mass moving within the translucent depths. She perceives coils and folds of some nature in this field of colour, though she cannot tell yet if she is seeing the layered petals of a flower bud of an odd glassy texture or the roiling of a viscous fluid. Slowly the form or perspective

blooms and swells, as if a spherical lens is being held before her eye. Then again, if it is a flower, then perhaps it is opening. Despite the obscurity of her vision, she experiences an intense feeling of déjà vu and a certainty that something is about to be revealed, which frightens her. At this point, the dream fades, or the rest is forgotten.

The dream seems inconsequential, but most dreams have a syntax and action that reflect upon the life of the dreamer and an impetus that drives image to image to image. This dream is too static, too narrow in its range, as if one particular facet and only this one facet of something more complex were being held up to tantalize her.

This was certified?, Pallin asks himself. How? He shakes his head, fearing for her. He sends a message to his Scholar librarian, instructing him to search for patterns in the image casting and if possible, any uses of the term, "Little Watcher" associated with the vague characteristics of the thing in her dream. Absolute security is required.

The next day, the ceiling scrolls a new batch of reports, and the request for a pattern analysis is largely redundant as Pallin can see for himself the knotting of phenomena. In a library, a complete face has been seen in the wall tiles, with strange radiating lines reminiscent of fingers or tentacles. Elsewhere, a man declared that his hands were not his own, the eyes on butterflies' wings showed expressions of curiosity (how can one tell?, he asks himself at this), red roses were observed to moisten and breathe like strange pudenda, more eyes opened in walls and another mouth appeared, uttering the words of dead languages. Most of these events occurred in one city, City One Thousand, called Ogygia, which is the city of Kore.

The narrative of Kore's latest dream is even more portentous. He listens to the recording of her voice: She dreams, she says, of what appears to be an oiled flower, and this time it opens. Something is nestled in its volume, which she realizes is in fact an entirely liquid medium. A dome rises out of the depths, the meniscus of the fluid at first forming a membrane or caul over its surface and then splitting and dilating like an enormous iris. It is as if something is both being born and opening its eye to her, though the lens is clouded.

A Watcher, Great or Little, knows her now.

A meeting of the Monstruwacan Council is convened. It is lengthy, but resolution is lacking. They cannot close their eyes to the Land, but they fear also what has been let in by Kore's sight. It is suggested that the girl be protected, kept from the Tower, while other seers, those who are less sensitive and deemed expendable, are sent up in her place. This is naïve: the relationship between Master and seer is one that takes years to build into a perfect synergy. In such a case as is proposed, Pallin says, he may as well look through a telescope and make drawings with a piece of charcoal.

Another points out to gloomy agreement that the walls of the Redoubt have already been transgressed. They

would be, so to speak, closing the cage after the butterfly has flown. Whether or not she watches, she will be watched and they may as well take advantage of the situation.

One rash soul new to the council comments that this heralds the end, a remark that is not excessive, but redundant. It was the end when the sun died, Pallin thinks to himself, when the Last Redoubt was built and the Electric Circle inscribed upon the Land, it was the end when the Watchers appeared and it was the end when the Watcher of the South broke the Glowing Dome.

Strangely, he finds relief in this litany of decline. He looks back on his life not as a man of action but as an aesthete, and the Redoubt itself, the pinnacle of a vast construction of history, is the vantage and vanishing point of human time. For millions of years already they have been looking back at memories of sunsets, former incarnations and lost loves. Perhaps they should be less concerned with such spurious ideas as fate and consider the beauty of what they already have. He is an old man, a hero. The younger man would not understand this.

It is decided that Kore will be watched. An observatory of sorts will be constructed within the Redoubt dedicated to this purpose. Pallin is naturally appointed to take charge.

Late that night he dons his old armour, still with its breaks and bends unrestored, and his breathing equipment, and ascends the Tower with two Watchmen. It is an odd mission, unplanned and without resources, but his own legend is enough to permit its authorization. Speculation paints a picture of standoff and confrontation, which he thinks is absurd, if not crude. He does not ask himself overmuch about his own motivations, knowing already that it is a foolish gesture of penance that may indeed be fatal. Foolish or not, he would not permit himself to use Kore as his spyglass if he did not look Out with his own eyes now and again. In any case, just by chance, he may learn something too subtle or abstract for a young mind or a mechanical device to grasp.

He steps out of the airlock on to a balcony that is used to service some of the externally mounted instrumentation and looks towards the South. His vision is neither enhanced nor filtered. The Watchmen are sceptical, not raising their own blinds, and have that sector of the horizon automatically edited from their sight. They are ordered to maintain this restraint should he fall under the influence of the Watcher and their help be needed. If necessary, they will kill him.

The spread robe of the living mountain's imposed geography twists his mind, but it is not beyond bearing, and he does not fall. Like Kore, he is the result of a long eugenic programme and in his case he has been given a curious mixture of personal sensitivity and lack of affect. That hybrid facility protected him well years ago out in the Night Land when others were driven mad or were fatally warped in their bodies by what they saw. The writings and folds almost make sense to him, a syntax becomes perceptible and he is almost fascinated, but he is able to realize that this is a subtle trap and dodges it,

shielding himself with obstinate incomprehension. The geoglyphs do not alter in counter strategy, being mere unconscious castings of the mind of the Watcher.

Its eyes should be another matter. He braces himself. They appear as great spheres of obsidian in mockery of normal human eyes. Curiously, they seem not to affect him at all. They reflect the ambient luminosity of the Land, little points of light appearing in their depths like the lost stars, but the only thing he feels within himself is the pressure of his own wistfulness.

How can this be, he thinks? Few are substantially unaffected and nobody feels nothing. It is as if the mind of the Watcher, concentrating all of its exertions through the eyes, is blocked at precisely the place from which its energy is directed. It is as if Watcher is blindfolded, he thinks, amazed. Another barrier more subtle than the wrecked Glowing Dome has been erected before it.

He descends swiftly into the body of the Redoubt. He does not trust this new barrier. It may not last, it may be a deceit. The monster watches through its own castings in the walls already and does not need those eyes, or it is not interested in him. Is it capable of such discrimination between individuals?, he asks himself. Apparently so, if the castings that are beginning to crowd around Kore are any indication. If indeed they are its castings.

All of these thoughts are questions, not answers, but they are at least useful lines of inquiry. With luck, Kore's dreams will provide answers. Again he abstains from his sweet wine. He has never regretted the need for his skills and his duty more than he does tonight.

When he finally sleeps, he has a dream of his own. He dreams that he is descending into a well of black water. He is holding a motley doll to his breast and knows, as one knows things in dreams without that knowledge having any source, that this little thing is the mountainous Watcher of the South. Looking up through the surface, he sees shimmering points of light and he has read enough history to recognize them as stars. As he descends, slowly and without any fuss, they go out, one by one.

Kore is with him, somehow dancing in the water at his side and smiling. "This is only a dream," she says. "The Night Land is only a dream, you know. Why don't you just wake up?"

He does wake up, and he is still in his bed in the Redoubt.

Kore has again dreamed of the oiled flower, she tells Pallin, narrating it for him as if it is happening at the very time that she speaks. Her eyes are wide and frightened in the pale oval of her face, not at all as reassuring as they were in his own dream.

This thing is a "Little Watcher," she says, knowing without being told. Its body becomes a little more clear to her as it rises to the surface. Around that dome as it rises, stirring the fluid, there are odd, coiled things, slender branches all in parallel, like fingers vastly elongated and depending from a supple wrist. Then she sees that they are connected with the round central mass, which is a head, though she is still uncertain as to its exact

form. She can't tell how large it is or whether it is evenly spherical, oblate or prolate, though perhaps it is the latter. The head seems much larger than her own body, larger than its body, if it has one at all. The fluid seems to curdle or become thicker, hiding the thing from her, only to reveal it again, a little different in its orientation this time, and now she sees that it has eyes. They are enormous, staring back at her, with pink irises like her own. She feels that odd sense of recognition once more, she says, as if she looks into a mirror. The hand flutters or beckons and the dream ends.

She is silent for a while, looking to him for interpretations and answers. He has none yet. "Can you draw this thing?" he asks.

"I don't know..." She rifles amongst her things and then finds a slate and styli. She lays the styli out neatly in a row and tunes them in a sequence of the five primary colours and then holds up two. "It was mainly this colour... and a bit of this." Red and infrared or ulfire.

Pallin nods, encouraging her.

Kore puts her hand to her chin and tilts her head in imitation of one of Pallin's own mannerisms. She is earnest and surprisingly calm; children can be very pragmatic once they have a definite goal in mind, and Kore has been trained in the art of description, so that she is eager to impress with her performance. She starts to draw, erasing her first efforts, but gaining confidence. The shape that emerges on the paper is a looping scribble at first as she tries to suggest the surrounding fluid so that it looks very much like a flower or a cloud of smoke, but as she builds up its form, pausing now and again to chew a knuckle thoughtfully, he sees that it is definitely a head or face of some sort. It is chinless and framed by tangled lines that he assumes are meant to be the thing's hands or tentacles, which emerge from where its lower jaw or cheeks would be. The eyes are enormous ruby orbs and would be conventionally toy-like if she wasn't so careful to depict wrinkles and folds about their corners. That detail, in all its naïve banality, drives home the essential veracity of her dream.

She holds up the completed picture, grinning proudly. His approval will be the one certainty that he can give her. "Yes," he says. "That's very good. You have excellent vision."

The reports of the image casts in the following days have an increased intensity. More and more of them are clearly alternative humanoid morphologies: eyes appear under thick brow ridges or none at all; hand prints of various proportions and allocations of digits are embossed on walls and floors; mouths that are lipless slits, tight little puckers or strange beak-like V-shapes begin to smile and gape. "Ulla, ulla," cries one.

The Eugenacists, with their disdain for the abhuman, are particularly distressed by these.

The other patterns, at first seen mostly in the library tiles, which seemed like faces, continue to only seem like faces. On barer surfaces they are more abstract, albeit complicated, making huge labyrinths and mandalas in the halls and galleries in subtle shades of jale at the edge

of perception. People find their thoughts twisted oddly by looking at them, and they are swiftly covered over. Pallin is the first to notice that they resemble the geoglyphs that surround the Watchers. The interpretation of their significance is ambiguous and uncertain.

There appears to be a rough demarcation between the two types of signs, both in form and location. The most human, or those that resemble variations of what a human being could be, tend to concentrate themselves around the Monstruwacan compound where Kore is housed. Obviously she is the eye of this particular storm. Because the order enjoys a high level of security, it is comparatively easy to suppress all overt reports of these manifestations, though rumours spread nonetheless.

The second type, the fractal labyrinth motif, appears more diffusely and more randomly in its range, but still has an overall tendency to gather about Kore.

Despite their differences, there still appears to be some significant overlap between the two types in their range, though it is uncertain whether this is concert or conflict. Hypotheses are presented at a Combined Council meeting of select guild representatives.

Bearing in mind the apparent blinding of the South Watcher and the images of the "Little Watcher" that Kore has seen, one Monstruwacan suggests, perhaps a previously unperceived force is active. Maybe it is one that has its own interest in humanity and is jealous of the Watchers. "Does it intend good or ill?"

"That last question is meaningless," objects one, a Eugenacist. "All abhuman forces, whatever good they do by their own reasoning – if such a term can be applied – are only briefly and by coincidence benign, because they remain at root abhuman."

A Monstruwacan known well to Pallin as a skilled interpreter of signs notes that the gaze of the Watchers is an active one. "In looking, they ask questions and in asking questions, they induce answers," she explains. "What they look upon is not simply destroyed, but is often compelled to iterate all of the latent possibilities of its being." Those seen previously by Watchers, with the recent exception of Pallin being the most notable, have sometimes died by the incarnation of their own contradictions.

"Are these eyes and faces in the walls then the answers that the Redoubt gives to the sight of the Watcher of the South?" asks someone.

"Perhaps these iterations have their own life and have become independent," suggests another. "Perhaps similar methods are used by two sides," argues the first. "There is still the essential difference in form and mode."

"Consider however the forms that we see," Pallin's friend points out. "Those closest to the attractor, Kore, are the might-have-beens of human evolution. Some clearly preceded the present form cultivated by the Eugenacists, but others mirror speculations found in the libraries on the matter of a linearly continued evolution, as indeed do her dreams. There is some coherence in the line shown here, not contradiction. It would seem to suggest, if not an absolute singularity of identity, a broadly human nature. Maybe it is an ally."

The Eugenacist visibly shudders. "There can be no allies among those that are by definition divergent from the bloodlines of the Redoubt," he sneers. "Kore should have been slain the moment these signs were seen to centre about her, the Monstruwacans should never even have sanctioned her conception."

Pallin does not speak during this meeting. What he might have said is said by others. He need not even speak in defence of Kore, because it is beyond mere certainty that he would fight for her with his very life should that be necessary. Instead he listens and he thinks. He has received reports of other knots of activity, less intense than that surrounding Kore, but portentous nonetheless. There are other attractors now and they will have to be identified and monitored. The battle is becoming a campaign and while many here see this gathering as marking an important turning point in itself, he sees it as but one stage in the working out of a grander strategy. These people are to him as symptomatic of the situation as the image castings are, not the drivers of events themselves, and he reads them as he reads any omen.

As the meeting closes and the participants depart, Pallin falls in with the Eugenacist. He does not like the man, but he needs him at this moment, and consciously plays on his limp as he walks up to him as a less-than-subtle reminder of who he is and what he has done, as if his face was not already well-known.

"Your time please, Master Eugenacist."

The guilds of the Redoubt intermesh and turn together like the mechanisms of a clock, but that meshing does not conceal the hegemony of the Monstruwacans. The man in white bows to the man in the deep purple when he is directly addressed. "Master Lector," he acknowledges.

Pallin feigns a stiffness in his back and inclines his head rather less than the other man and holds up his hand, palm open. "Pallin ex Asphodelos."

The Eugenacist returns the gesture nervously. He knows very well who he is, he knows that Kore is his charge. "Of course," he says. "Corder ex Maera." Is this his name, or his title?

"I have an inquiry regarding the status of my line."

"Ah." Corder is uncomfortable. "Tell me, does this concern... your family?" The Monstruwacans are themselves one family. To preserve the appearance of neutrality the most senior members take vows surrendering all other affiliations and claims to inheritance, but certain scions of the order such as Pallin are a special case.

"It does, and more."

"Ah. This is perhaps not the ideal time and place."

"No, it is not," Pallin agrees.

An appointment is made and the two go their separate ways.

As an immediate response to the infiltrations, the Electric Circle has more power allocated to its circuit and its frequency is adjusted to match most closely the known radiations of the Watchers. It appears that the fractals are rarer thereafter, whereas the anthropomorphic forms are more common. Apparently the latter, if not in their origin, now have an independent basis of life within the

substance of the Redoubt now, like an infection.

There is an indication that the strengthening of the Circle seems to intensify the hunger of the Watchers and the Southern monster seems to stare with its full intensity again. Even Pallin does not look directly at it now.

The Tower still scans the remainder of the Land as assiduously as ever, but makes only the most cursory observations of the Watchers, sufficient to confirm that they are, for the time being, utterly still. He prepares a report on this state of tension, which is thick with questions and cautionary statements.

To his surprise, it is an unknown woman who meets Pallin in the College of Eugenics. "Master Corder is indisposed," she explains. "I am also of his clan, my name is Laschi."

He raises an eyebrow. Surely the man had not been so intimidated? More likely he is trying to avoid a conflict of interest if he is to attend further Combined Council meetings. It is of no matter; he has no concern with the internal politics of the Eugenicist's guild. He bows and holds up his palm in acknowledgment of her role. "Respected Lady, I understand. Please pass on my wishes for a speedy recovery."

"I will."

She leads him to her office and they are seated. On her desk of gleaming deep ulfire heartwood there are three grey alloy oblongs with rounded edges and corners. Each is a book, pressure-sealed in its own binding with neutral gasses. She releases the seals of each, which hiss sharply as their internal pressure equalizes, and opens them for his inspection. Pallin notes the titles and is pleased. She has received his latest reports and is well-prepared. Time will not be wasted.

Laschi indicates the first of the books, which has shining new pages of metal added. "This is your own genealogy," she explains.

"Of course."

"I have read stories of your exploits."

He keeps a neutral expression. Fame is a poor payment for the lives of his men, but it has its uses. She is not unattractive, he notices.

"Of your adventures in the Land," she continues. "You slew monsters and abhumans, you confronted a Silent One and lately you have gazed upon a Watcher, unshielded."

"You must feel vindicated," he says with a note of irony.

She nods, interpreting his tone as modesty. "Indeed. I am pleased to say that your children have been granted the right of reproduction and we are assessing a pool of candidate mates for their selection now. We think that in some generations there will be a line of people of true human stock who may nonetheless be able to survive in the Night Land."

He does not shake his head, despite his scepticism. He does not doubt the ability of the Eugenicists or the sincerity of this woman, but he does doubt the point of their aim. "Only the Land?"

"Where else is there?"

"Of course." It occurs to him that he should speak to

some of his children to offer congratulations. Again, this will require an appointment and he defers the arrangement.

"You must be pleased."

"I am."

She notes his reticence, even if she does not understand it and forwards the second book, which also has new pages. "This is the genealogical record of Kore ex Timarchos."

He scans the lines. "She will be of age soon," he says.

"That is correct. I have consulted with the Lady Hecane and while the time is not yet, it will be soon. A decision must be made."

"Corder spoke rather intemperately."

"I'm afraid that I am not privy to the minutes of Combined Council meetings," she says in an obliquely apologetic tone.

"No, you are not, but I note that there is some concern."

She nods. "There is. Though we depend upon them, we must always be cautious with our seers, must we not?"

"We must," he admits. He closes the book. "Tell me of these Little Watchers."

The last book is slim, and much older than the others. There are no new pages and the set-speech dialect is archaic. There are numerous annotations in the spacious margins explaining now-obscure terms and usages. Despite its great age, it is only the last of a relay of copies.

"This is what we think relates most closely to Kore's descriptions of a Little Watcher."

The book concerns human evolution, being specifically devoted to some of the more outré possibilities envisaged before the Eugenicists determined their own programmes. It has most certainly come from the deepest secret archives and has been released for the first time in scores of millennia only because of the needs of the current circumstances.

He reads. There are charts extrapolating cranial growth, commentaries on the redundancy of a digestive system and a rigid skeleton, the importance of the eye and the hand and so on. There is a note that the most distant vertebrate ancestors that crawled onto the land from the sea had eight digits instead of five and that the reactivation of certain genes might allow their redevelopment. An illustration is presented, and inevitably it is only a more refined version of Kore's drawing.

"Were creatures like this ever bred?" he asks, concealing any hint of recognition. Laschi's mental reaction is so immediate and strong that he doesn't even need to see her face to know the answer. "No, of course not. Are there fossils of this or any intermediate stage?"

"We are not aware of any. Perhaps the Scholars have records from expeditions into the Land?"

"There are no reports of fossils resembling this creature from this or any historical age," he tells her, knowing that a negative is by definition unprovable. "What is your interpretation?" he asks.

"That is your prerogative, Master Monstruwacan."

He looks into her mind for the first time. It is an im-

lite thing to do, especially as she is not deliberately concealing anything from him, but he thinks that perhaps he can make more sense of her incoherent store of data than she can herself. He can tell that she fears the possibility of a rogue genetic engineer having been at work. Strictly speaking, it is not impossible that someone or something may be conducting experiments outside the Redoubt, and while many of the creatures of the Night Land have branched from the human root, they have largely done so through natural, albeit accelerated evolution and very few would have the inclination or technical means to deliberately tamper with their own germ plasm. Beings such as the Silent Ones might perhaps do so, but this creature is closer to the vanishing point of the true human line than they, and in any case, they are well-adapted to the Land and would have no cause to bend their path now. Of course where the Silent Ones are concerned, nothing is certain, but they have never been image-casters and Pallin is sure that they are not associated with these apparitions.

"As far as I can determine, such things exist entirely in the realm of our present dreams and visions," he tells Laschi.

Pallin is polishing his old Watch souvenir when an alarm sounds. The news is not good. Kore has now, in her flesh, begun to exhibit manifestations of her visions. Memories of the things and forces that afflicted his men, Out in the Land, rush through his mind, and he almost runs to Kore's domicile.

He arrives winded, and his leg aches, reminding him too well that his limp is no affectation. He ignores the pain and scans the faces of the guards and doctors and the tenor of their minds too, but they are all wearing masks and their thoughts are too confused to reveal anything of substance. Each, indeed, seems to have seen something entirely different. The electronic logs are no better, being hopeless blurs of static and contradiction. He clamps a mask of calm assurance over his own face and steps into Kore's cell.

The room is not small, because it must contain sophisticated observational equipment, and it is not uncomfortable either. The Monstruwacans have tended towards austerity in their long history, but not cruelty or callousness. They have allowed her many familiar things in fact: favourite clothes, furniture, a silk tapestry, cages of singing insects. There is the odd toy too: a motley clown lies on the floor seeming to indicate nothing more than untidiness.

He has expected the apparition of something monstrous and perhaps pools of blood, but the child appears at first to be relatively safe and normal, though she is trembling in terror. This is almost a relief to him, giving him the false hope that whatever happened has finished, to leave her in this state, though he soon sees that this is not precisely the case.

The girl is crouched at the head of her bed, her knees drawn up to her chest, the bedding wrapped and knotted around her like a cocoon. Her round face stares at him, huge-eyed at the peak of the whorl of embroidered

fabric. It is as if, he cannot help but think, she is the centre of a huge flower, or a miniature of a Watcher rising out of the palimpsest plain of the Night Land.

He sits on the bed beside her, leans over her and whispers gentle commands. At his prompting, a pale hand emerges from under the quilt. The fingers might perhaps be elongated and move as if they are without rigid bones, but it is hard to tell. She could well be performing like a Masquer, her gestures describing a state so well as to make it visible, he thinks. The alarm, the panic might well be the result of a delusion, no image-casting at all.

He almost slaps himself. These defensive thoughts are unworthy of him. The people who made the reports, however inarticulate they may be, saw something strange and he must observe this strangeness without false hope or fear now. He focuses on the hand, counting her fingers, and, following his cue, Kore looks too. There are five fingers, slender, but not overlong.

There are eight fingers.

There are five.

She snatches the hand under the quilt and shudders. He places his hand on her shoulder and is not sure whether it is her reaction or his own or something else that makes it feel as if he has received an electric shock. He coaxes her to show her hand again and it creeps out as if it has a life of its own, a pale spider. Five, he counts. Eight. The two numbers are true at once, overlaid.

"What is happening to me?" she wails.

Neither can say, though they know in a way that cannot be spoken. He shakes his head. He picks up the doll for her, but she will not reach out to take it.

There is another Combined Council meeting in response to the latest manifestations. The meeting is quicker than the last, the immediacy of the crisis having concentrated everyone's minds marvellously, though it might be said that this was only a facile demonstration of deeper forces.

Corder, bearing no sign of recent illness, is outspoken, probably fearing that his guild will be held responsible for what is, to them, an experiment gone terribly awry and threatening the status of their other ventures. Kore must be isolated, he demands, held in a cell outside the body of the arcology itself, or even eliminated and her kin neutered. There is a certain basic agreement implicit in even the most overt criticisms of this proposal.

Pallin could attack him directly, but he does not. Instead he draws on his own position, hinting not too subtly at the hegemony of the Monstruwacan Order and characterizing Kore as a phenomenon to be observed. The Eugenicists, he suggests, are the instruments by which the order observes the omens of humanity. What is happening to Kore, it is quite clear, is an expression of what is immanent in humanity, no matter what its cause might be.

"Is she not therefore a branch to be pruned?" Corder suggests acidly.

"No," insists Pallin. "Not yet. We of the order claim our prerogative. You have provided us with the greatest of opportunities to read the influences of the Land by one such as myself... and you will observe me."

Most notice only the display of authority, but Corder, for all his defensiveness and bluster, is not a fool. Pallin is the other great experiment of the Eugenicists. Pallin knows, of course, that he has stacked the rights of his children in a wager against those of Kore in a complex game, and he does not love himself for the fact that it has always been his nature to calculate and gamble with lives. However, he thinks bitterly, the Eugenicists claimed his children when they claimed him, whereas he has chosen Kore by what he thinks is his will, and if anything so trite as worth is to be calculated, he will count the coins that are still truly his own.

Too soon there is another alert, and Pallin once again rushes to Kore's cell, accompanied by a Watchman whom he has nominated to watch him on behalf of the Eugenicists.

"See, don't you see?" asks the doctor, the black lenses of his protective mask glinting. "There."

Those lenses have not protected you from fascination, have they?, Pallin thinks, and looks at what lies on the bed.

There is an adolescent girl, an adult, an old woman. All three look back at him with the pink eyes of the Timarchos line. They are all Kore.

These images flicker, like an illusion of faces meeting to make the silhouette of a candlestick or vice versa, each aspect on either side of possibility, neither of which is truer than the other. He sees hands with eight fingers and five fingers.

Pallin can tell without looking over his shoulder that the Watchman grips his killing instrument all the more tightly, his every instinct calling out for murder, but he doesn't even need to hold up his hand to forestall the reflex. The man is one of his own and too well trained to need restraint and watches alongside his old general.

There is something demonic, dark and browless. It is a simian ancestor of humanity, Pallin remembers from

the files. Other forms alternate: a figure almost like the familiar girl Kore, but somehow altered to appear as an adult that has retained her childish characteristics. And then there is another quasi-simian form, but white-pelted and its eyes glittering with a peculiar intelligence. There is a debate being enacted here, he senses; possibilities and fates are being weighed in relation to each other.

The reified head of the definitive Little Watcher appears for a while, overdrawing all of the other images and appearing to float in a bubble of air before him. It is utterly familiar to him from the drawings that he has seen already: it appears to be all head, its brow a nearly spherical dome, its eyes huge and its fingers trailing like vines. The mouth is a small fleshy beak, a V-shape that seems to smile at him slyly and the folds at the corners of its eyes also seem to crinkle in amusement, but that could easily be only a personal interpretation. The vision evaporates.

Kore groans and curls tightly about herself as the doctors close in.

The fact is that Pallin is no longer guardian to Kore

except in that he guards her from those who would keep her. He has long outgrown the naïve belief that he is beholden to be a man of action, but even in the Tower of Observation, where it was his duty to sit and to observe, he had been complacent with his own legend and never felt the absolute powerlessness of the spectator as he does now. He knows that this state that he experiences now is inevitable and unalterable, but the last battle is breaking his selfish heart.

The siren in his room is triggered, sounding like the wails heard from the mouths in the walls, crying "Ulla, ulla." Yes, the process that began in the Tower will complete its cycle in Kore's cell tonight, he knows. He rushes to her, the pain in his leg only goading him on.

He regards Kore one last time, or many times. She is



blurred, the image-castings, if that is what they are, overlap. The young girl, is there, and there are other forms too: the adult and aged women who will never be realized here, the primitive hominid, the blend of adult and child, the white brute. Seen mostly clearly of all there is the Little Watcher floating within a hazy mandorla or ring of light, its delicate, eight-fingered hands held wide and trembling like the wings of a butterfly about to fly away.

The Watchman and the doctors press themselves against the wall, their masks presenting nothing but reflections to its gaze. They make a semicircle around Pallin and it is only he who shows his own face and his own eyes.

"Ulla, penitence!" it says and reaches out a fingertip to brush his cheek, causing him to start. The Watchman seizes him and pull him back, but he slips out of his grasp.

"Sir! Are you harmed?"

"No, Captain, I am not." He would return the touch, but he cannot move.

Those enormous eyes, the colour of the anachronistic roses, blink, and in a blink Kore or the compound of all that she might have been vanishes.

It is a sleep period, many days later, but he rises from his bed and stalks the battlements, feeling like a ghost still. Insomnia gives him a certain clarity and detachment. Prudently, he is helmed and guarded, and while he looks to the various quarters of the horizon, mostly the Southern, he sees only voids at certain points. He contemplates one of these voids now.

This act, like his last pointless expedition to the balcony, seems heroic and adds to his legend. Even his most recent actions build on his legend rather than undermining it. In the Great Hall of Honour there will stand a statue of Pallin ex Asphodelos in his broken armour. Indeed, one has been ready for years; its installation only awaits his death. This hardly matters to him because there will be no monument to Kore, though there may be a legend and a cult, of which he will not approve.

The experiments of the Eugenicists have achieved what appears to be a clear outcome. Following the ratification of the Watch Captain's report on his continued sanity, they will award unlimited rights to Pallin's line. Meanwhile they will do their best to extinguish all trace of Kore's, but he doubts that they will find many to neuter once the Little Watchers have finished their business. There are many reports now of other people undergoing metamorphoses and nobody dares approach them. Following his orders, the Monstruwacans will protect them until they are able to escape. Perhaps they should not be called Little Watchers, but Seekers.

Thus another ending of history is marked, he thinks. Kore has slipped our starless realm while we have ourselves and the eternal Watch. We shall refine this state and remembrance will be our delight.

The Electric Circle flickered in the last night, as it has never done before, and there was a tremor as the Watcher of the South took what amounted to a step. The Redoubt is thick with superstition as it has not been for

millions of years and Pallin wishes that he could breathe the razor thin air of this altitude without artifice.

Again he ponders the manner in which the Great Watchers are fascinated by the Redoubt. The great arcolony must appear as a towering furnace of energy, coruscating with milliards of sparks of fragmentary and ephemeral life. Its heat draws but scalds them. Image castings are sent as probes through the curtain of the Air Clog only to be cauterized instantly. They creep closer, but the ontology of humanity impresses itself hideously upon their bodies. We madden them and we petrify them. As they do us.

His hand strays to the silver crescent at his throat, touching the woman's face there that looks out with her eyes unshielded.

We are too much alike in manner and too alien in essence to ever escape or know each other, he thinks, looking into the bland nothingness of his helm's synthetic perception. Your temporary blindfold is gone now, but I wear my helm, poor Watcher, and I will die. What can be your escape?

Are the Little Watchers, Little Seekers, new or old Allies? Were they the creators of the Dome, the Eye Beam, the temporary blinding and the other things that halted the advance of the Great Watchers for a while? Are they image castings from the imagination of the Watcher of the South? Have they been induced from the collective imagination of humanity? In whose thrall are they? Are they their own? In whose thrall are we?

A litany. Pallin is clever in the making of litanies. The last question is easy to answer, he knows: humanity is in the thrall of the Great Watchers. Are a few of us being rescued by the ghosts of what we might have become?, he asks himself. Is the whole history of the Last Redoubt therefore a lost opportunity only partially, desperately redeemed by a strange evacuation? Is there a brighter time beside our own? If so, he will never live to see it. He is a man of honour and knows that honour is the thin line that defines integrity when there is no hope. Only the past is open to him and he is pleased that it is full of glory.

There are increasing signs of change in his own hands and eyes now, but they are only age.

Brett Davidson is a brand-new writer who lives in New Zealand. The above story is one of a loose series set in the world of William Hope Hodgson's unique far-future masterpiece *The Night Land* (1912). Its predecessors in this magazine were Andy Robertson's "The Eater" (issue 175) and Nigel Atkinson's "An Exhalation of Butterflies" (issue 179). However, the stories are not explicitly linked and can be read in any order. Hodgson enthusiasts, and the merely curious, are recommended to take a look at Andy Robertson's and Nigel Brown's "Night Land" website (<http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/nightmap.html>).

RULESforROBOTS v.1.0

Gary Westfahl

In the Holy Bible of science fiction, Olaf Stapledon's novel *Star Maker* is the Book of Revelation, Robert A. Heinlein's song "The Green Hills of Earth" is the 23rd Psalm, and Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics are the Ten Commandments.

Given our peculiar fascination with laws – which are continually re-examined and reinterpreted in light of new contexts and situations – Asimov's Laws have predictably received a disproportionate amount of attention, both inside and outside the science fiction community. In later stories by Asimov himself, authorized sequels to his works, and unofficial homages, the Laws have been examined, played with, and expanded. Experts in robotics have published articles on possible applications of the Laws to the creation of artificial intelligence. Discussions of the Three Laws permeate the Internet.

Despite evidence of great interest, no one to my knowledge has examined how the Three Laws gradually achieved their final form – their legislative history, as it were – perhaps because no one realized they had ever been different. For in all publications of Asimov's robot stories and novels since 1950, the wording of the Three Laws has always been precisely the same:

- 1 – A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow

a human being to come to harm.

- 2 – A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
- 3 – A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

However, in the pages of *Astounding Science-Fiction* where eight of the stories in Asimov's first robot collection, *I, Robot*, originally appeared, one finds Asimov expressing the Laws in various ways, in passages that were removed and replaced with the canonical text when the stories were revised for book publication. True, these provisional versions are not strikingly dissimilar, but they cumulatively provide an illuminating paper trail of the issues in contents and phrasing that Asimov faced in developing precisely the right language to express the Laws.

For the first text of the Laws of Robotics, unavailable in *Astounding*, we must rely upon the after-the-fact testimony of the only person who heard them enunciated.

On December 23, 1940, Asimov visited John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *Astounding*, to discuss his idea for a story about a mind-reading robot,

later written and published as "Liar!" During that conversation, as Asimov reported in *In Memory Yet Green*, Campbell commented,

"Look, Asimov, in working this out, you have to realize that there are three rules that robots have to follow. In the first place, they can't do any harm to human beings; in the second place, they have to obey orders without doing harm; in the third, they have to protect themselves without doing harm or proving disobedient."

They weren't elegantly phrased, but that was never Campbell's forte. The question is: if the Laws first came out of Campbell's mouth, did he invent them? Since Asimov probably had already developed the key idea of "Liar!" – a robot disobeying orders to tell the truth to avoid hurting people's feelings – he might legitimately take credit for at least envisioning the first two Laws. However, nothing in "Liar!" or the robot stories before it – "Robbie" and "Reason" – contain any intimation of the Third Law, which thus can be attributed exclusively to Campbell. From one perspective, this is merely paradoxical: the young, insecure Asimov focused entirely on imposing human values and priorities on his subservient population of robots, while the older, overbearing Campbell was giving robots some backbone by grant-

ing them a drive for self-preservation.

On the other hand, one might criticize the mindset that led Campbell to concoct the Third Law. After all, if one considers western civilization's major code of behaviour, the Ten Commandments, in the context of Asimov's Laws, the first five Commandments relate to the essence of the Second Law, obedience

– to either God (worship no other gods, make no graven images, do not take the Lord's name in vain, keep the Sabbath) or one's parents (honour your father and mother). The other Commandments relate to the essence of the First Law, altruism (do not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet what your neighbour has). There is nothing in the Ten Commandments about a moral imperative to protect your own ass, yet Campbell elevates this selfish concern to almost the same level as altruism and obedience. (In Campbell's defence, though, one might argue that robots require this Law, lacking a biological instinct for self-preservation, or that writers require this Law, to better generate conflicts between robots and humans.)

The First Law was introduced in a conversation between Susan Calvin and a colleague in "Liar!":

"the fundamental law impressed upon the positronic brains of all robots ... [is] On no conditions is a human being to be injured in any way, even when such injury is directly ordered by another human."

"How nicely put," sneered Calvin. This rendering of the First Law is in the passive voice ("not to be injured," "is ordered"), a stylistic infelicity common to novice writers and certainly a weak way to communicate the idea. But at this stage, the exact language of the Law was not important, as indicated by Calvin's reply that it was "nicely put." Here, Asimov envisions the Law as an instruction, symbolically embedded in robot brains, that is not equivalent to any particular sequence of English words; one might express that Law in any fashion that comes to mind. Only later will the Laws take the form of specific language in the *Handbook of Robotics* that is memorized and recited by all roboticists. Imbuing the Laws with such gravitas demanded a sense of self-confidence that the young Asimov did not yet possess.

The "three fundamental Rules of Robotics" debuted in their entirety in the fourth robot story, "Runaround" (*Astounding*, March, 1942):

One: a robot may not injure a human being under any conditions – and,

as a corollary, must not permit a human being to be injured because of inaction on his part.

Two ... a robot must follow all orders given by qualified human beings as long as they do not conflict with Rule 1.

Three: a robot must protect his own existence, as long as that does not conflict with Rules 1 and 2.

This is close to the final version, with certain exceptions. At this moment, Asimov prefers to think of these principles only as "Rules," created by individuals to control games, perhaps because he does not yet feel comfortable about proclaiming grander and more imposing "Laws," created by governments to control nations. The term "corollary" too overtly communicates his advanced education in mathematics and science. He thoughtlessly genders the robot as male, then grammatically permissible, but creating a loophole for a homicidal female-gendered robot who could let humans die because it would not constitute "inaction on his part." And note that the Second Law demands obedience only to *qualified* human beings, without clarifying precisely what qualifies humans to command robots. This problematic stipulation would eventually be dropped, engendering worries in later stories about powerful robots controlled by four-year-olds or lunatics.

The next robot story, "Catch That Rabbit" (*Astounding*, February, 1944), only offers another version of "the First Law of Robotics: that a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to be injured." The story additionally contains the first reference to the "Handbook of Robotics" later established as the official source of the Laws.

In "Escape" (first published as "Paradoxical Escape," *Astounding*, August, 1945), all three Laws make their second appearance, though Asimov endeavours to express them as tersely as possible:

the Robotic Laws ... [are] One: A robot may not, by action, or through inaction, harm a human being. Two: A robot must obey orders given by authorized human personnel, except where this would conflict with Rule One. Three: A robot must protect its own existence except where this would conflict with Rules One and Two.

The concise rewording doesn't really work for the First Law – how might a robot actively "harm" "through inaction"? – but Asimov has at least settled upon "it" as the proper pronoun for

robots, and the Second Law's revised phrase "authorized human personnel" is a tad more precise, implying that some sort of employment "authorizes" humans to control robots.

By the time one gets to "Evidence" (*Astounding*, September, 1946), "the three Rules of Robotics" are being described as "the famous bold print on page one of the 'Handbook of Robotics,'" and Asimov is visibly striving to encapsulate them in a tightly structured and dignified fashion:

Rule One: A robot may not harm, nor, by inaction, cause to be harmed, any human being.

Rule Two: A robot must obey all orders given it by authorized personnel, except where these would conflict with Rule One.

Rule Three: A robot must preserve its own safety, except where that would conflict with Rules One and Two. (129)

He is still fumbling the ball in striving for a nice rhetorical balance in the two parts of the First Law (this is also a story about Asimov's evolving skills as a prose stylist); the omission of "human" from the Second Law might raise concerns (are all "personnel" necessarily persons?); and broadening the Third Law to prioritize "safety," rather than "existence," would potentially lead to robots unable to leave their homes and cross the street because of the minuscule but genuine threat to their "safety" such a move would create. Wisely, Asimov would quickly revert to "existence."

What is more intriguing about "Evidence" is that Asimov is not merely using his Laws to generate clever stories; he is visibly *thinking* about his Laws. Calvin comments, for example, that "if you stop to think of it, the three Rules of robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems," suggesting Asimov's understanding that his Laws, far from innovative, are better regarded as adaptations of widely accepted moral values. He is further discovering inherent complications in the First Law, fittingly emerging in connection with the first Asimov robot who is also a lawyer.

A district attorney is suspected (correctly) of being a robot, but the question arises: how could a robot oversee a system that necessarily injures certain humans – accused criminals – by imprisoning or even killing them? In response, Calvin describes a robot who must kill a single person to save the lives of several people; it is in the position "of having broken Rule One to adhere to Rule One in a higher sense ... He protects the greater number and

thus adheres to Rule One at maximum potential." Similarly, if the robot attorney knows that his work is beneficial to large numbers of law-abiding citizens, he can justify actions that harm a few lawbreakers. This sense of a First Law "in a higher sense" or "at maximum potential" will eventually coalesce into the Zeroth Law of Asimov's *Robots and Empire*: "The prevention of harm to human beings in groups and to humanity as a whole comes before the prevention of harm to any specific individual."

"Little Lost Robot" (*Astounding*, March, 1947) offers the First Law in almost definitive form – "No robot may harm a human being, or through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm" – though the negative seems misplaced: "No robot may harm" as opposed to "A robot may not harm." The story also demonstrates that the second part of the Law, seemingly a legalistic afterthought, is actually the more powerful injunction. When robots are built with only a truncated version of the Law – "No robot may harm a human being" – the danger is created, as Calvin explains, that a robot could let go of a heavy object, watch it fall and crush a human, and argue that the force of gravity, not the robot, did the harm.

In the story, Asimov offers only succinct summations of the other two Laws: "the Second Law of obedience" and "the Third Law of self-preservation" accompany "the First Law of human safety." Perhaps, as Asimov's reputation and stature were growing, he no longer thought it necessary to state them in full every time.

The last robot story in *I, Robot*, "The Evitable Conflict" (*Astounding*, June, 1950), appeared only months before the book, so one would expect to find canonical versions of the Laws. Surprisingly, Asimov is still toying with his language:

the First Law of Robotics... No robot may harm a human being; nor, through inaction, may he allow one to come to harm.

the Second Law... All robots must obey the orders of all qualified human beings as long as these orders do not conflict with the First Law.

the Third Law... All robots must protect their own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First and Second Laws.

Notice, throughout this history, that the First Law has been most frequently mentioned, and most frequently tinkered with. Understandably, this is the Law that people are most attentive to; it is the Law that protects their own

asses. In revisiting it this time, unfortunately, Asimov has been not only clumsy, but ungrammatical; since the "he" of the second part must refer back to "No robot," the second phrase translates to "no robot may not allow one to come to harm," a double negative meaning that any robot must allow a human to come to harm. In establishing Laws for beings that now include lawyers, such sloppiness in language is inexcusable. Also, the robot has somehow become a "he" again, a problem Asimov presumably recognized and immediately addressed by violating parallel structure and shifting to plural forms ("robots... their") for the Second and Third Laws.

More significantly, discussing the actions of the advanced robot intelligences known as the Machines who "work not for any single human being, but for all humanity," Asimov provides them with a preliminary version of the Zeroth Law: "No Machine may harm Humanity; nor, through inaction, may he allow Humanity to come to harm." In retrospect, no one should have been surprised by the official unveiling of the Zeroth Law in *Robots and Empire*.

In settling upon the canonical language introduced in *I, Robot*, and making one later addition, did Asimov achieve a perfect version of the Laws? Almost, I would say. At the level of copy-editing, my personal preferences, to maximize the parallelism and aura of logical precision, would be to have the First Law use "harm" twice instead of "injure"; to change the "where" in the Second Law to "when"; and to revise the Third Law to more closely mimic the Second: "except when such protection would conflict with the First or Second Law." More globally, I might mention potential conflicts involving the Third Law parallel to conflicts Calvin discerned in the First Law: it would seem desirable for a robot to sacrifice its own existence to preserve the existence of 40 robots, but the Third Law as written would not permit such self-sacrifice. Perhaps the Third Law could be subdivided to prioritize the existence of robots in groups or robotry as a whole over the existence of individual robots...

But this game can go on and on, as websurfing will reveal, leading to more and more refinements and expansions of the Laws that eventually seem frivolous and finicky. We might be better advised to embrace the Laws as Asimov left them to us, for he worked harder than people realize to whip them into shape – and in light of their lengthy tenure and continuing prominence, one cannot say that his efforts were wasted.

Gary Westfahl

The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction

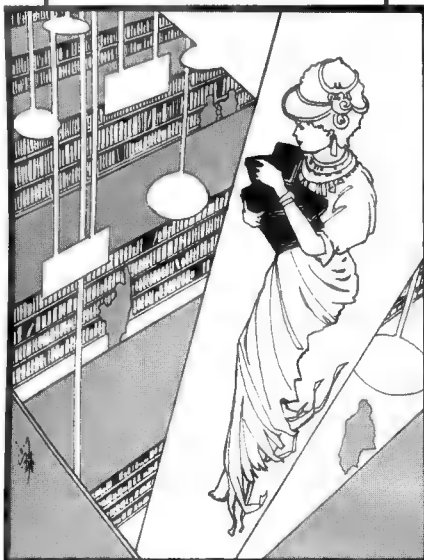
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by David Pringle
Second Edition
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REVIEWED

As well as co-authoring novels with Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, Steven Barnes has also produced a number of sole-authored fictions, and *Charisma* (Tor, \$24.95) is the latest in this latter group. A contemporary horror-thriller with sf overtones, this is a tale that promises rather more in the way of moral ambiguity than it finally presents.

Charisma's schema concerns a group of disadvantaged children who, unbeknown to their families, have been "imprinted" with the value system, philosophy, bodily control, determination and, yes, the charisma, of one of "History's Great Men." Through a battery of psychological techniques, these chosen children are effectively brainwashed into sharing the worldview of media mogul, Olympian, potential Presidential candidate, and war veteran, Alexander Marcus (Barnes overdoes the indicators of greatness slightly, but this only enhances the novel's elegant contrivance).

With the memes of Marcus's celebrity power about to spread across a new generation, a weakness in the imprinting process is uncovered. Alexander Marcus had a taste for extreme violence and torture, and this may have insinuated itself into the experimental child subjects. Hence the novel's puzzle, and its attempt to steer away from black and white tones of good versus evil: should all these seemingly innocent and brilliant kids be treated as serial killers in the making? And if it could be demonstrated that they were psychologically or statistically likely to go on to claim victims of their own, then should these children be killed so as to prevent notional but greater numbers of mur-

ders? With its interest in personal choice versus predetermination, this story chases across some of the same ground as the film *Minority Report*, raising the problem of pre-charisma as well as that of pre-crime.

Setting up a devilish version of utilitarian calculus, where misery has to be minimized rather than happiness maximized, *Charisma's* narrative raises unanswerable questions within its thriller-genre confines. Ultimately, it closes down its early complexities with a series of homilies and pop-fiction clichés; never mind the nature/nurture debate, because love makes everything all right. Never mind that these children may have murdered people, because they only

Cults and Clichés

Matt Hills

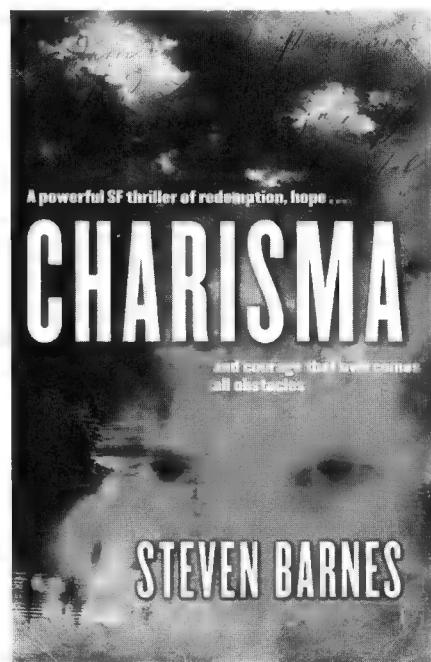
disembowelled or incinerated really bad people. And never mind questions of psychology versus sociology, because some people just choose to do the wrong thing, and neither we nor Barnes can explain that choice. All of these are simplistic and individualistic cop-outs.

Charisma is, I think, strongest in its opening sections, before it is compelled to introduce obvious black-hat types and when irony and foreshadowing can resonate and rebound across different scenes. For example, Alexander Marcus crops up as a hero and role model to a range of characters, including a not-so-young jaded journo who works for the media conglomerate Marcus Communications (more authorial over-control and over-working). Near the novel's beginning, Marcus's name is typically buried amid a welter of detail, just another piece of the background perhaps, except we already know that greater things are afoot thanks to the book's spoiler-heavy back-cover blurb. As soon as the novel's high conspiracy is unveiled then frankly no amount of pseudo-science and cod philosophy is going to spare it from seeming at least a little predictable. But before *Charisma* crystallizes out into upscale hokum, it carries a measure of uncanniness and menace, threatening to cast patterns of significance across its many *dramatis personae*.

And Barnes also successfully evades the hoariest of plot possibilities – some kind of showdown between Marcus and his psychological progeny – via the initial twist that Marcus has already died before the story picks up. Marcus is a memory; a poster on the wall, or a piece of old video footage. Still, his absent-presence haunts the proceedings.

Although the events leading up to the "Charisma Lake Incident" involve a very wide range of folk, Barnes zeroes in on a particular subgroup of augmented children all of whom reside, years after the imprinting experiment has officially ended, in the small American town of Claremont. At the same time, Barnes focuses on one Claremont family caught up in Marcus's research: that of young Patrick Emory, and his mother and father. The victim of racist abuse, Patrick seemingly idolizes Marcus at least in part because he is a powerful black role model. And though the novel gestures in the direction of tackling themes of racial prejudice and social disadvantage, it raises these questions organically and sometimes in passing rather than in any lumbering, pre-programmed way.

Patrick's character provides one moral testing ground for the conflicts whipped up by the experiment. We are privy to many of Pat's thoughts and feelings, and so witness his interior



struggle with violent thoughts and impulses, as well as his use of the training and discipline that has been instilled in every experimental subject. Pat and the other imprinted kids constantly refer to aphorisms such as "The Way is in Training," or "Do nothing that is of no use," orienting their decisions through these phrases. Carried out within the circle of Claremont kids, this seems to be part of a gang mentality or identity. But as *Charisma* progresses, the gang motif is replaced by another comparison: these kids aren't just part of a Bly-tonesque club, they are part of a blighted cult. The child-subjects' cultic quality is something that becomes more pronounced when they are all gathered together at summer camp and their behaviours, even down to breathing patterns, become weirdly synchronized. This summer camp of the damned carries many of the novel's most striking images, as the camp counsellors wonder just what has unnaturally united all their charges, and as Barnes fully imports the horror genre's interest in childhood innocence disrupted. Although predominantly writing a pacey thriller, at points Barnes can't resist drawing on the conventions of horror. In fact, these serve almost to bookend the novel, since it opens with allegations of child abuse and mysteriously shared dreams and closes with the uncanny togetherness of Camp Charisma Lake.

Another relatively recent title that draws on themes of self-creation versus destiny, and on the matter of a mysterious birthright, is Richard Calder's *Impakto* (Earthlight, £6.99). But where *Charisma* ends uneasily in cultic and individualistic clichés, *Impakto* revels in its hokum, using cliché to such excess and with such devilment that it engineers a romantic sincerity all of its own. This is a stunning, mind-bending and genre-melding tale of one man's birthright and its consequences for Earth, Heaven, Hell and the entire multiverse. Not afraid to leap from the everyday and the small-scale to an all-encompassing metaphysic, *Impakto* is fantasy with a science-fictional colouring. It is the story of an ordinary man who discovers his extraordinary destiny through ■ quest across dimensions. But Calder knows there is something faintly embarrassing, if not quaint, about all the wish-fulfilment and near-paranoiac grandiosity that is vented through his novel's protagonist, Raul Riviera. *Impakto*'s trick is to take the creakiest of plot structures and the crassest of clichés, and make something fabulously knowing out of them. Calder directs his reader to the ludicrousness of certain situations, and

meditates at length on clichéd similes such as the bullet-torn body that looks like raspberry jam (page 196). Such writerly poise and confidence allows Calder the luxury of having his clichés while mocking them too.

"Impakto" is, we are told, a term for unwanted babies that are ripped from their mother's wombs and left for dead, their abandoned bodies becoming possessed by demons. And Riviera is one such. The novel's opening sees him transformed from profane status as he realizes for the first time that he is spirit-infested (cliché counter: hero possesses special powers but doesn't know it). But Riviera's fate becomes far more complex, as he is sent to meet his artificer, Maximillia, an unearthly woman who helps to repair and strengthen Raul's demon-suppurating body (cliché counter: our special hero is selected for an arcane mission, upon which hangs the survival of worlds as we know them). In case there is any doubt about Riviera's initial ordinariness, we are told that he worked as a reviewer of computer games, and that in his old life he was unsure of his masculinity, lacking assertiveness and self-confidence, especially with women. This depiction resonates with the stereotypes of geekdom, as if Calder is offering up a geek-turned-god, partly in a postmodern spirit of playfulness, and partly in the good, old-fashioned hope that this transformation might be taken seriously.

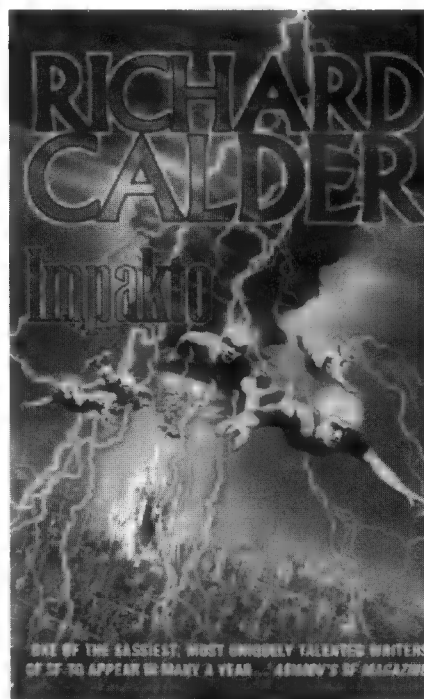
Discovering that the world of men and women has infected the demonic world, Raul is given not one mission, but two. The first is simple enough: to kill and usurp his demon progenitors, the King and Queen of Hell (cliché

counter: our hero must confront his dark past and triumph over those who have made him what he is). This overheated oedipality, which gives rise to an absurd tangle of perverse family relations by the novel's end, is quite literally only half of the battle in *Impakto*.

The other battle faced by Riviera is even more jaw-dropping than a struggle with Satanic forces. Moving away from Hell's in-fighting and coups, Calder's invented theology tackles a daring conceit, and one that consumes every teasing, knowing cliché in a blazing fireball of imaginative redemption. For in this version of a multiverse, God has never existed alongside demons and Hell. Humans and demons have interacted across history, but God has found no reality outside of human religious beliefs. He has not been. However, religion – Catholicism in particular – has begun to affect the multiverse. Human ideas are becoming real, spawning baby universes and creating actual deities. God has been created retroactively by his flock, and He wants absolute, retroactive power over all dominions. Heaven has only recently come into being as part of the multiverse – created in line with human images and ideas of what Heaven should be – and God has declared war on Hell, to be followed by a campaign against humankind. Riviera's goal, should he choose to accept it, is to kill this dreamt-of God, storming Heaven while accompanied by Hell's latest revolutionary forces.

Although writers like Anne Rice have made demons and vampires their heroes, and Philip Pullman has tackled revisionist theology, Calder's combination of conventionally "evil" protagonists and reworked religion delights in startling the reader. Angels mount terrorist attacks on Hell, and demons have a politically oppressive society replete with its own demonized, stigmatized outcasts. Radicals, revolutionaries and the fantastic are thrown together in a kind of dream logic, one refracted through the cultural geography of the Philippines and Manila in particular. Human spaces and human lives are echoed in the otherworldly place known as Ur: it is not only religious beliefs that have been made remade in demonic universes, but other aspects of regional culture too.

Calder emphasizes the power of Hell's hierodules, sacral prostitutes, of which Maximillia is one example. The depraved beauty of these hierodules is thought to be able to provoke a re-ordering and re-imagining of Hell's political order, and *Impakto* has much to say on the power of beauty and the imagination. Although these sentiments, too, may be knowing clichés, Calder imbues them with such energy



and innocence that they become a vital part of the book's core and of its integrity. Alongside grand battles to gaze upon the face of God, *Impakto* is hence a love story of sorts, with Maximillia restoring Riviera's faith in his childhood hopes and imaginings. There is a romanticism here, as elsewhere in the book, one that rests on the valued intersections of imagination and reality. But *what* we imagine is something we must take responsibility for, especially if, as here, those dreams and ideas can effect real worlds. Dreaming of love

Retro space opera is alive and well in *The Praxis* by Walter Jon Williams (Simon & Schuster, £10.99). Williams has enjoyed a long and varied career across a range of genres, including hard sf and historical fiction (see his interview in *Interzone* 162). He uses his expertise and experience in these two particular areas for his latest book, bringing them together to create the world of the Dread Empire.

Earth has been conquered by aliens – centauroid pack creatures called Naxids; but they themselves are under the rule of other aliens: the Shaa. These enigmatic self-styled Great Masters of their Empire impose their absolute rule over every alien species they can: Humanity is bombed into surrender with anti-matter missiles flung at us from space, destroying over a dozen cities in an unprecedented brutal assault.

Run the clock forward 10,000 years and humans are now only one of many alien species within the Shaa's empire, living under their unyielding system of control, the Praxis. But 10,000 years is a long time. By now we gladly serve our Great Masters in their space fleets, on board ships with such evocative names as *Bombardment of Los Angeles* and *Bombardment of Delhi*.

Williams begins his series (this novel is "Book One of the Dread Empire's Fall") with a potentially fatal crisis for the Empire. The Shaa have been dying; now the last of the Great Masters is about to expire, leaving a power vacuum at the top of this vast star-spanning empire. Events are told from three points-of-view: the first is that of an ambitious Lieutenant in the Space Fleet, Gareth Martinez. The second is that of a cadet in the Fleet, Caroline Sura; the third is that of a girl from the planetary slums named Gredel. Williams weaves the strands of their stories together against the backdrop of the impending death of the last Shaa – by the time the Great Master dies we're fully acquainted with these characters, and ready for trouble ahead.

Snippets of background are scattered along the way, together with unaddressed questions about the rela-

and beauty is one thing. Dreaming of a vengeful or monotheistic God may be quite another matter.

Beginning with a plane flight and crash, *Impakto* ends, rather appropriately, with another literal plane impact. Imagined for the reader in Riviera's account of what could have happened, or has somehow yet to happen, this second impact takes on a mythic quality, suspended between the present-tense and Riviera's looking back on it as an event. Standing in for the entire novel's between-ness and its toying with imaginative fantasies and political realities,

this conclusion is again a testament to the power of imagination, asking readers to use theirs. A kind of incitement, Calder's witty end to this stunning riot of retooled clichés suggests that imaginative ideas leak off the page and into readers' lives, just as religious beliefs had earlier leaked into the novel's multiverse. As such, it is no trite heroic status that is Riviera's real birthright: it is his creative imagination. That birthright of imaginative play is Calder's also. And, thank God, it is ours.

Matt Hills

Times Future, Times Past

Nigel Brown

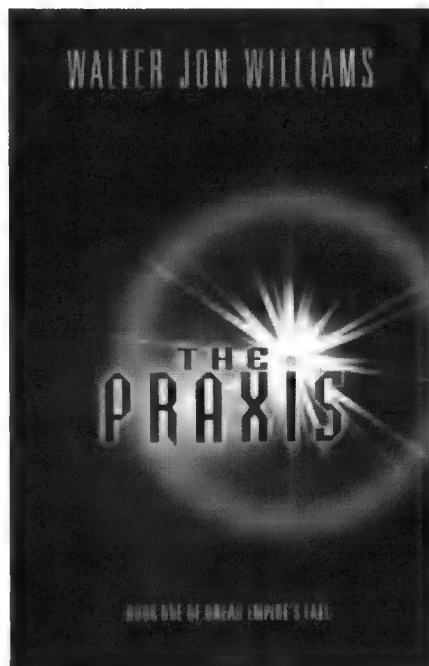
tionship between the conquered and their conquerors. Williams's characters have no qualms about proudly serving their alien masters in warships named *Bombardment of Delhi*

and the like. They are truly a conquered people – it does not occur to them that they are demonstrating any kind of unacceptable submission to the will of the Shaa, or that this is treasonable behaviour, so fully have they submitted to the rule of the Praxis. If this difference in world-view is meant to emphasize a point by simply ignoring it, then this does present problems with reader identification. It was difficult initially to engage my sympathies with such quislings.

Another aspect of the Praxis – and a crucial part of the Shaa's rule – is the banning of certain categories of technology, notably machine intelligence, nanotechnology and genetic manipulation. This, together with the feudal society that they impose on their conquered alien races, gives the novel a distinctively retro feel. Williams has, at a stroke, eliminated these tropes from his sf world (subjects that feature more and more in our daily newspapers, never mind in our monthly sf magazines). This does serve to simplify his future, if this was his aim – but it has led to a static society where some of the more way-out possibilities of technology have been ignored. The spaceships and ray-guns are fun, but – along with this society – are frozen into cliché.

But Williams goes further than this: a consequence of the feudal world of the Shaa's empire is, additionally, to fix his characters firmly within a social network of obligations to those above them, together with responsibilities and patronage to those below. Naming his aristocracy the "Peers," "Lords" and "Ladies" sets us firmly in this context: the characters are forced by their social conventions to act within their boundaries. No one thinks "out of the box."

Another aspect of this world which echoes our history – and Williams's previous historical adventures set on sailing ships of war – is the Shaa's space fleet: it reads like Nelson's Navy in space. The relationship between the officers and men, and the structure of the space fleet's organization, all resonate strongly with the current popular Men o'War naval fictions set in the



Napoleonic era. To his credit, Williams has painted a realistic picture of this, but the parallels are drawn too closely for my taste – sf should be fiction of the unfamiliar. Patrick O'Brian and his fellows have made us all too well acquainted with this kind of naval fiction. When it crops up in a novel describing a space fleet 10,000 years in the future, it disappoints somewhat.

But despite this – as we notice the novel's furniture and perhaps let it fade into the background – things suddenly start to happen. Williams proves he can grab the reader's attention. The stage is set. The last Shaa is dying. For thousands of years, the rulers have been such a powerful cap on the power structures beneath them that there has not been the juggling for power that plagued the feudal societies of our own medieval times. When the last of the Shaa dies these various factions erupt into war.

Suddenly the novel is saturated with suspense. Things start to happen

on a larger scale than plot-turns within the petty lives of Martinez, Sura and Gredel. We've been following these characters' attempts to better themselves, but the impression is that of watching the stage-hands put out the stage props before the main action starts. It takes over 200 pages to get there, but when Williams begins to chart the Dread Empire's Fall, the pages start to fly by.

He winds up the tension well, and by the time we're into the space battles we've been expertly primed: reading this section of the novel is like watching a train crash in slow motion – the juggernaut is heading for disaster and we can only wince as the characters blithely do what they can under the circumstances, but it's never enough. The novel ends, we're well into the story, things are going badly for our heroes, and we want to read on. But we can't – at least, not until Book Two.

Perhaps I should start my campaign

for shorter books here. If *The Praxis* was maybe two-thirds the size, it would have been a stronger book. The feeling is that Williams is building his story slowly and carefully because he has the room: but he's written superbly at short length, with such gems as "Dinosaurs" (1987) and "Lethe" (1997), and he has ten appearances in Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthologies under his belt. I just wish he'd tackled this novel with the same brevity and imagination displayed in so many of his shorter pieces, with less of the historical influence, and more of the hard sf – written with more of an eye to the future than to the past. But perhaps I'm being unfair. After all, this is only Book One of the series: the world of the Dread Empire has yet to be fully drawn.

Nevertheless, now that he's fired the starting pistol, Walter Jon Williams has done more than enough to make me want to stick around for Book Two.

Nigel Brown

It's been a few years since we last reviewed a best-of-the-year sf anthology and now there's a new kid on the block – *Science Fiction: The Best of 2001* edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber (ibooks, \$7.99 or £5.99) – to challenge Gardner Dozois's venerable monopoly. And it's formidable competition because, alongside his stellar writing creds Silverberg has stacked up a succession of highly regarded anthologies over the years, both reprint and original.

First impressions first: Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Nineteenth Annual Collection* (St Martin's Press, \$35; released in the UK as *The Mammoth Book of Best New Science Fiction: 15th Annual Collection*; Robinson, £9.99) is its familiar doorstep self, dauntingly heavy with eye-strainingly dense print, whereas the Silverberg/Haber (hereinafter the S/H) is a lot slimmer with more vision-friendly text. The Dozois, along with its hefty intro admirably summing up the sf year, divides its usual 250,000-plus words amongst 23 stories, compared with the S/H's mere eleven. So on size the Dozois is a clear winner, but on price the S/H has the edge.

Next: overlap. Five stories appear in both anthologies, which is a lot as best-ofs go. Reassuringly, the five are strong (well, mostly) and easily among the best of both volumes. In no particular order, they are: 1) Michael Blumlein's "Know How, Can Do," which gives us an experiment in accelerated artificial evolution that shrewdly and poignantly questions what it means to be human – definitely a best; 2) "Into Greenwood" by Jim Grimsley, one of the longer stories on offer, which shows a richly visualized otherworld society and a supposedly symbiotic

relationship between man and plant that is actually very far from that; 3) "On K2 with Kanakeredes" by Dan Simmons, which effectively combines meeting-the-alien with mountaineering; 4) James Patrick Kelly's "Undone," whose protagonist backflips through time resetting events as she goes – which Kelly shows us in tedious detail by reversing whole pages of text (*text of pages whole reversing by detail tedious in us shows Kelly... get the pic-*

ture?); apart from being redundant (does any sf reader actually need to read through this word salad?) and intensely irritating, it's also illogical – why run the words in reverse but not the letters in them?; still, Dozois and S/H both chalk up points by including it as it's up for the Hugo and therefore *must* be brilliant (so apparently it's just us that rate it *good-but-Hugo-surely-you're-joking?*); 5) "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" by Michael Swanwick, which is an endearingly entertaining shaggy-dog story that drops us straight into a baroque future world which boasts a genetically altered – and scheming – dog among its wonders: this we both agreed was, just like the Blumlein, a genuine best.

Now to the forensic examination. First, the Dozois. The lead story, a hefty work by Ian R. MacLeod, a writer we rate highly, "New Light on the Drake Equation," turned out unfortunately to be, while readable, not vintage MacLeod. We're on his familiar turf – missed chances and broken lives that won't mend – mixing SETI and a future France that veers a tad too close to parody. Robust editing would have slimmed the wordage somewhat and made it more effective. (Ian R. MacLeod has a second story here, the far-future near-fantasy "Isabel of the Fall," which you may remember from *Interzone*, but sadly we liked this one even less.) A long novella, "The Human Front," also from clan MacLeod – this time Ken of that ilk – closes the anthology. It's a readable engaging-if-not-quite-plausible alternate history that tapers off disappointingly into *X-Files* territory at the end.

After our long reviewing gap, it was

Battle of the Best-ofs

Neil Jones &
Neil McIntosh



interesting to find that *Interzone* still gets its customary quota of two stories. One is the MacLeod that we didn't much enjoy, but the other is Chris Beckett's "Marcher," which we did: it's an offbeat little tale which combines a fresh take on alternate worlds with some almost-familiar immigration questions.

There are some other engrossing stories here. For example, Allen M. Steele's "Days Between" – an astronaut in suspended animation is woken way too soon in an interstellar journey; Andy Duncan's "The Chief Designer," woven around the Russian space programme, which is long, believable, and oddly moving; and William Sanders's "When the World is All on Fire," which gives us a slice-of-life in a future world where society is under strain and neatly reverses the role of whites and Amerindians. Right at the other end of the scale, however, is the heavy-going/low-reward "One Horse Town," by Howard Waldrop and Leigh Kennedy, a dreary fusion of Troy, Homer and Schliemann.

Somewhere between these two poles we've bracketed two sorts of story: first, the obviously worthy, full of depth, maturity and insight, that made us feel guilty for just not enjoying them that much – for example, Geoff Ryman's "Have Not Have," about have-nots having; Maureen F. McHugh's "Any Given Day," which clearly has something worthwhile to say about adolescence and the ethics of relationships; Robert Reed's obliquely Amerindian fantasy "Raven Dream"; and Paul McAuley's reworking of Philip K. Dick's life in "The Two Dicks."

Then there are the readable-but-nothing-special pieces: for example, Paul Di Filippo's "Neutrino Dog," an amiable 1950s-set let's-go-racing-in-space first-contact tale; Carolyn Ives Gilman's manic time-travel yarn "The Real Thing"; Eleanor Arnason's watery adventure "Moby Quilt," and Nancy Kress's "Computer Virus."

To be fair, picking the best ain't always that easy. Although our overall views tend to be broadly similar, occasionally even we Neils disagree, and two stories here divided us diametrically. Michael Cassutt's "More Adventures on Other Planets," which has human-steered surrogates on a Jovian moon, is either very dull or, because of the strength of the human relationships, one of the stronger stories in the book. And Alastair Reynolds's "Glacial," a fusion of murder mystery and space exploration (and apparently the latest episode in a far-future saga that one of us plans to catch up on a.s.a.p) is either dullish or atmospheric-and-gripping. Very different verdicts, then, although our overall ratings for the collection remain the same: one hit and one miss apiece.

Overall, and much as we might wish we could report otherwise, very few stories struck us as being obvious standouts. What disturbed us more, though, was that there weren't that many stories we actually enjoyed reading. We found ourselves wondering if that was down to us rather than the stories themselves. Then we recalled the *Blumlein* and the *Swanwick*: if the book had contained more stories to match these two, then we'd be writing a much more positive review.

Dozois's volume weighed in at its usual massive size and we wonder whether, other than as a marketing tool, it really needs to be that big. If each year the stories were winnowed down to the genuinely outstanding, and if the merely-OK filler were left out, then less would be more.

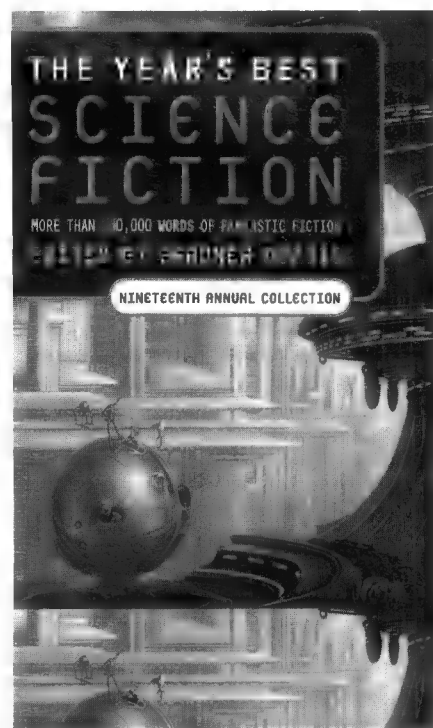
After the Dozois, we turned, with something less than enthusiasm, to the slimmer Silverberg/Haber volume. The longest story in it is Ian Watson's complex and ambitious novella of the bizarre side-effects of faster-than-light travel, "One of Her Paths," which happily turned out to have a lot going for it, including fresh ideas and readability. But we particularly enjoyed "From Here You Can See the Sunquists" by Richard Wadholm, which, rather than sidestepping the old time-travel paradox of meeting yourself when you back into the past, confronts it head-on and builds the whole story around the premise. It's curiously old-fashioned as well as entertaining and reminded us both of Ray Bradbury (praise indeed). Also, S

& H's choice of Nancy Kress story (the only writer, by the way, to feature in both books with different works), the brisk and efficient eco-thriller "And No Such Things Grow Here," just tops the Dozois choice.

Still, the S/H does include a couple of clear misses and one absolute turkey. "Anomalies" by Greg Benford, a mix of hard maths and astronomy, starts promisingly (although confusingly: from the stilted prose, both of us assumed that we were back in the 17th century) but then shades swiftly into dullness. Steve Baxter's "Sun Cloud" is an identify-with-the-alien *Mission of Gravity* for the new millennium which ups the alienness without engaging us strongly enough. But "Keepers of the Earth," Robin Wayne Bailey's trusty-robot-servants-get-smart/inherit-the-Earth/get-environmentally-pious/turn-on-their-masters yarn is a choice that's really hard to understand: it's more so-so-1961 than best-2001.

Overall verdicts. Both books boast the only two stories we rated genuine standouts – the *Swanwick* and the *Blumlein* – so equal marks there. But although Dozois has selected some readable stories, many of his choices are just not sufficiently to our taste – maybe they'll be more to yours. While it too has some less successful stories, the shorter S/H worked better for us: we reached the end of the Dozois with more relief than regret, but the S/H left us wanting more. And so, as a snapshot of the year as well as a rewarding and enjoyable read, we'd say go for the Silverberg & Haber.

Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh





Peter Hamilton comes home! After gallivanting around most of space and time in his past few books, in *Misspent Youth* (Macmillan, £17.99) Hamilton returns to the stomping ground of his first three novels, near-future Rutland, with a new tale that is quite startlingly good. Of course it won't please the purists, and it won't please the space opera fans, but it is nonetheless as solid a piece of science-fictional near-future speculation as I have seen.

The scenario is partly familiar: agitation among the English to be out from under the yoke of Brussels, mega-rich people with their consciences cushioned against the harsh realities of modern life by their money, and, as in all proper science fiction, a scientific advance that is the lynch-pin of the story. And it is pleasing to see a tribute to real-life author Graham Joyce as a cameo robust 80-year-old author who still has a valid political point-of-view to share.

Unlike the earlier Rutland books, however, this is not a futuristic crime novel. Instead, in many ways it is more reminiscent of the worthy Young Adult fiction that has appeared over the past few years, intent on appealing to teenagers by emulating their lifestyles and then trying to slip them a moral message in the overall text. There are young people aplenty having relationship problems and hang-ups, and losing their virginities and not really getting along with their parents, but there is also a solid real future world out there, and it impinges on their self-obsessions in a most effective and compelling way. The outcome is that the parent-child bond is reinforced despite the most heinous of betrayals any father could inflict on his son. When I got to the final line, I really couldn't believe that Hamilton had written it, unless it was

Back to Earth with a Thump

Paul Brazier

in a sense of mawkish irony. However, given the preceding 357 pages, it is a true and fair culmination of the story. Perhaps I should be less cynical in my old age.

When our editor gave me Charles L. Harness's new book, *Cybele, with Bluebonnets* (NESFA Press, \$21), he told me that it was more autobiography than fantastic fiction. It is pleasing to report his error, not because he was wrong, but because the book is so good – and fantastical.

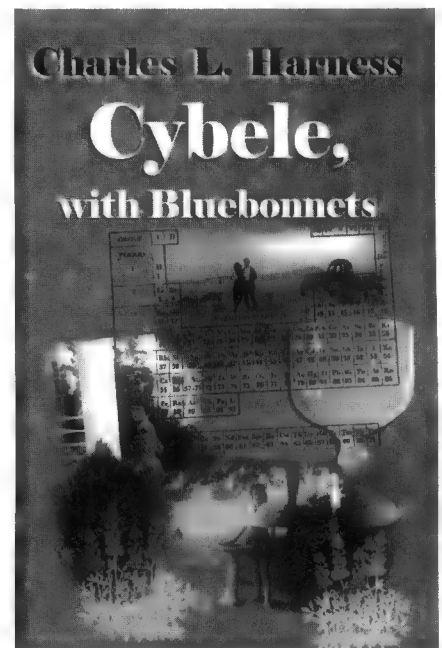
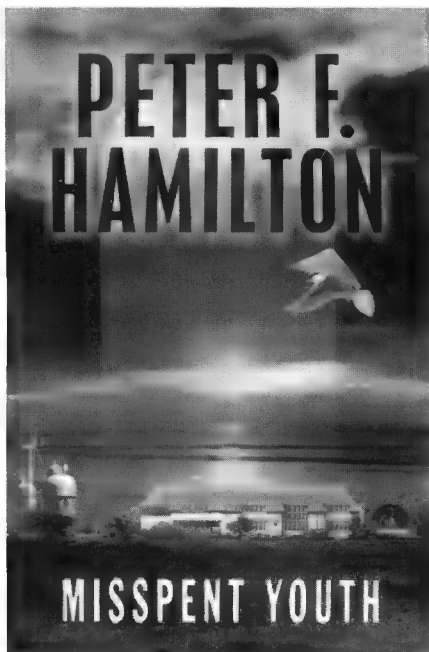
The series editor, Priscilla Olson, talks somewhere of this being "magic realism." Well, that might be what she would call it, but I would call it a ghost story, and a damn good one at that. The problem is that many people think ghost stories are horror stories. They're not. Ghosts are not necessarily malign, and, as in all the best ghost stories, it is hard to tell whether the ghost that haunts Joe Barnes, the central character of *Cybele, with Bluebonnets*, is magically real or simply a figment of his rational and rationalizing mind. Either way, the story is a eulogy to small-town wonderfulness. It reminded me in equal parts of Cliff Simak and Garrison Keillor. Having come to it straight from *Misspent Youth*, I began reading at the break-neck speed that Hamilton seems to demand. But it didn't make sense. On consideration, this Joe Barnes was from a small Texas town and born in the early part of the 20th century – he would likely have a wonderful slow drawl. I slowed my reading down, and the story swam into focus.

This is the story of the first part of a young man's life, and it plainly shadows Charles L. Harness's life – Joe Barnes and Charles Harness were both brought up in Depression Texas, and both became first chemists and then lawyers. It follows his experimentations with chemistry from his earliest days, and expounds in a remarkably clear voice many of the fundamentals of chemistry in such a

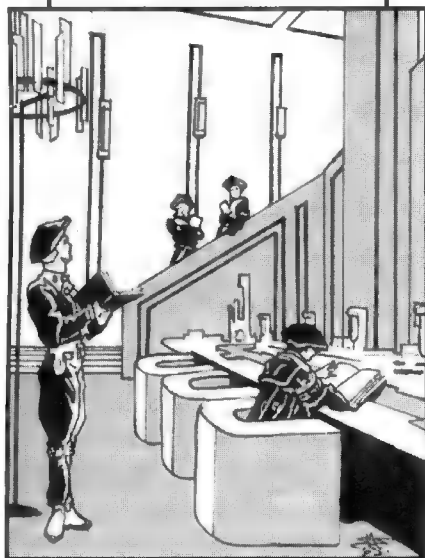
way as to make me want to know more. Chemistry was the only subject I never grasped at school; how I wish I had had a teacher of Harness's mettle. He evokes quite precisely the joy of being in a laboratory, although it might be hard for anyone who has never felt it to believe this. He also uses his broad knowledge of chemistry in some quite implausible but ingeniously forensic ways to help the police and to move his plot forward. And he peoples his story with the most believably irreverent and quirky characters. It seems unlikely that there was ever a Cybele Wilson of exactly this fantastic character in Charles Harness's life, but the way she and other characters are blended into the overtly autobiographical detail is really quite remarkable. In the middle of the tale, Joe Barnes tells a completely implausible tall Texan tale to a small boy in a public square in Washington. We, privileged to know Joe's background, know exactly how much of the story is true, and how much is invention. I stand before this book as that small boy stood before Joe's invention: completely taken in, but unsure how much to actually believe. I can think of no finer compliment.

We should take with a pinch of salt the Gene Wolfe encomium featured on the book's jacket. While the story is very good and my life would be diminished had I not read it, it is not, as he implies, one of the "thousand wonderful books." The science is too precise to please the literati; the magic realism is too whimsical to please the hard science fans. But there is heart here that is becoming harder to find nowadays. This is probably why it has had to be published by a small press. No, it is not a great book – it doesn't have wide enough appeal. But I love it.

Paul Brazier



BOOKS RECEIVED



NOVEMBER
2002

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Abnett, Dan. **Straight Silver.** "Warhammer 40,000. Gaunt's Ghosts." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-262-8, 315pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; this is the sixth "Gaunt's Ghosts" title by Abnett in the "Warhammer 40K" series.) *November 2002.*

Adams, Douglas. **The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07484-1, 178pp, hardcover, £5.99. (Humorous sf radio-series novelization, first published in the UK, 1979; this is ■ small-hardcover reissue, at a paperback price, of the by-now classic sf satire which established the late Douglas Adams's reputation.) *21st November 2002.*

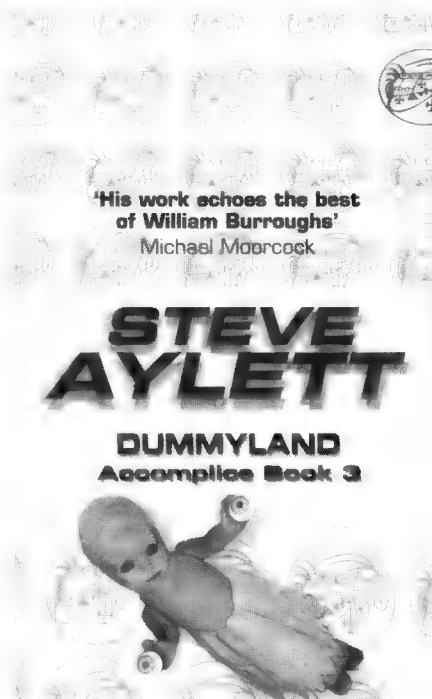
Adams, Douglas. **Life, the Universe and Everything.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07485-X, 184pp, hardcover, £5.99. (Humorous sf radio-series spinoff novel,

first published in the UK, 1982; this is a small-hardcover reissue, at a paperback price, of the third book in the "Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy" series.) *21st November 2002.*

Adams, Douglas. **The Restaurant at the End of the Universe.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07486-8, 196pp, hardcover, £5.99. (Humorous sf radio-series novelization, first published in the UK, 1980; this is ■ small-hardcover reissue, at a paperback price, of the second book in the "Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy" series.) *21st November 2002.*

Arden, Tom. **Empress of the Endless Dream: Fifth Book of The Orokon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-60196-5, xiii+592pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the final book of this humorous and inventive five-volume sequence, it has rather a nice title; "Tom Arden" is a pseudonym for Australian-born author David Rain.) *14th November 2002.*

Aylett, Steve. **Dummyland: Accomplise 3.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07087-0, 119pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; another characteristically slim [but dense] piece of freaky lit [or "bizarre pulp," as *The Scotsman's* reviewer calls it] from Aylett; it's the third in the rapidly-appearing "Accomplise" quartet, following *Only an Alligator* [2001] and *The Velocity Gospel* [2002].) *21st November 2002.*



Cartmel, Andrew. **Foreign Devils.** Foreword by Mike Ashley. Frontispiece by Nathan Skreslet. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-11-1, 149pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover] priced at £10 [not seen]; the limited "deluxe edition" which the publishers have sent as ■ review copy is signed by author, illustrator and introducer; this is the fifth in a series of nicely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from David J. Howe and Stephen James Walker's Telos imprint; for ordering information see their website: www.telos.co.uk; set in the early 1900s, it turns out to be a Doctor Who-meets-Carnacki the Ghost-Finder story, inspired by the stories of William Hope Hodgson; the latter's "The Whistling Room" [1910] is reprinted as an appendix [pages 129-149 of this volume].) *23rd November 2002.*

Cherry, C. J. **Explorer.** "The stunning conclusion to the second *Foreigner* sequence." DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0086-4, 408pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the sixth and perhaps last in Cherry's "Foreigner Universe" series of thoughtful space operas, of which the previous titles – all three-syllable one-words and therefore hard to tell apart in the memory – were *Foreigner*, *Invader*, *Inheritor*, *Precursor* and *Defender*.) *November 2002.*

Chetwynd-Hayes, R. **Frights and Fancies.** Edited by Stephen Jones. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-7137-X, 270pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £17.99. (Horror Collection, first edition; ■ posthumous volume by the late British writer Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes [1919-2001], this brings together 20 of his previously uncollected stories with an appreciative six-page preface by Stephen Jones.) *29th November 2002.*

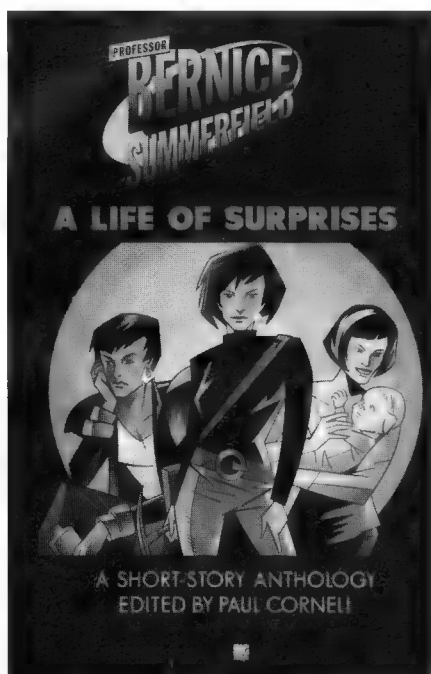
Cooper, Loren W. **The Gates of Sleep.** Silver Dragon Books [Renaissance Alliance Publishing, Inc., PMB 238, 8691 Ninth Ave., Port Arthur, TX 77642, USA], ISBN 1-930928-77-7, 176pp, trade paperback, cover by Linda Callaghan, \$12.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; it's set in the near future and involves lucid dreaming; the author, who lives in Oregon, has written at least two other small-press books.) *November 2002.*

Cornell, Paul, ed. **Professor Bernice Summerfield: A Life of Surprises.**

"Celebrating her 10th year in publication!" Big Finish [PO Box 1127, Maidenhead SL6 3LW], ISBN 1-903654-44-0, 164pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Salmon, £14.99. (Shared-world sf anthology, first edition; starring the space heroine created by Paul Cornell, it contains all-original short stories by a bunch of the usual suspects: Terrance Dicks, Paul Ebbs, Steve Lyons, David McIntee, Daniel O'Mahony, Kate Orman, Lance Parkin, Justin Richards, Dave Stone and others.) *Late entry: states "September 2002" inside, but received in November 2002.*

Counter, Ben. **Soul Drinker.** "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-260-1, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; ■ debut novel by ■ British writer who has contributed short stories to Games Workshop's *Inferno!* magazine.) *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.*

Coward, Mat. **Twenty Seventeen.** Illustrated by Philip Hurst. "Literacy World Comets." Heinemann [Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8EJ], ISBN 0-435-22907-9, 111pp, trade paperback, cover by Hurst, no price shown. (Juvenile sf novella, first edition; the tale of ■ displaced boy, set in ■ war-torn Britain of the year 2017; this is a first sf book by an author already known for his two crime novels, sundry non-fiction works and many short stories [some of them in



Interzone.) *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.*

Crichton, Michael. **Prey.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-715379-1, xiii+367pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition [simultaneous with the US edition]; Crichton's latest super-thriller, aimed as usual at the mainstream audience, is on the by-now hoary old sf theme of nanotechnology [scientist K. Eric Drexler is duly credited]; the "prey" of the title are the members of the human race.) *25th November 2002.*

Davey, John. **Blood and Souls.** Nephryte Press [PO Box 37815, London SE23 3WQ], ISBN 0-95200-746-0, 220pp, hardcover, cover by Gustave Doré, £20. (Fantasy novel, first edition; ■ debut novel by a British writer perhaps best known hitherto for his work as Michael Moorcock's bibliographer; the book is dedicated to MM, and seems to contain ■ number of in-references for the Moorcock fans.) *18th November 2002.*

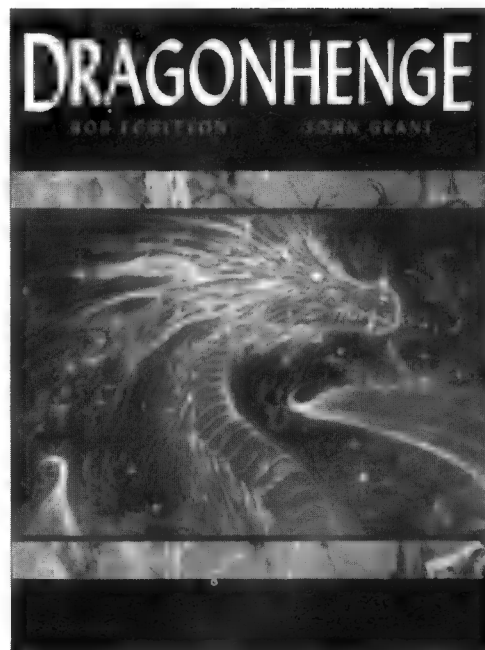
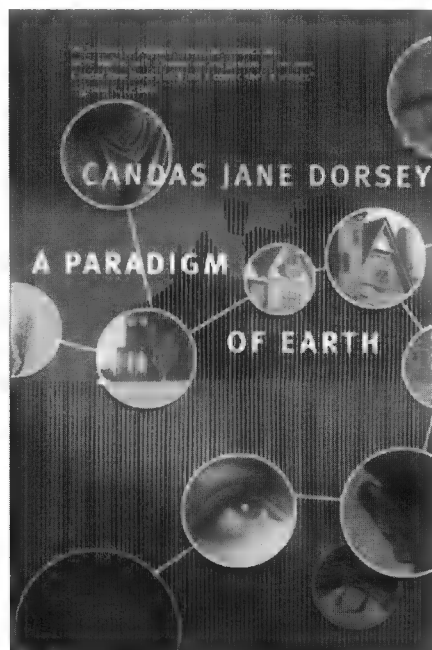
Dexter, Kathleen. **Fifth Life of the Cat Woman: A Novel.** Berkley, ISBN 0-425-18618-0, 258pp, trade paperback, \$13. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this anthropomorphic feline fantasy, which appears to have been a debut novel, was originally published by a small press and is making its first commercial appearance now; the author won the *Writer's Digest* National Self-Publishing Award for Fiction; the publish-

ers commend her to the Isabel Allende and Alice Hoffman readership.) *5th November 2002.*

Dorsey, Candas Jane. **Paradigm of Earth.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87797-8, 366pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; Canadian writer Dorsey's first new novel since *Black Wine* [1997], it was commended by editor David G. Hartwell as "a novel of love and learning and emotional growth that is reminiscent of the classic sf stories of Theodore Sturgeon.") *21st November 2002.*

Douglass, Sara. **The Crippled Angel: The Crucible, Book Three.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710849-4, x+455pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £7.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; conclusion of a trilogy, begun with *The Nameless Day* [2000], set in an alternative 14th-century Europe, by Australia's most successful Big Commercial Fantasy author; oddly, we have no record of ever having received Book Two, which apparently was called *The Wounded Hawk*.) *4th November 2002.*

Eggleton, Bob, and John Grant. **Dragonhenge.** Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-972-6, 128pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Eggleton, £20. (Heavily illustrated fantasy collection; first edition; described as "a unique collaboration, born from the interplay of ideas between two multiple award-winning creators," this is essentially a collection of "legends" about a world of dragons, inspired by Eggleton's artwork and written by John



Grant [i.e. Paul Barnett]; it's an attractive volume, with many full-colour and black-and-white pictures plus a substantial imaginative text; Paper Tiger, which has long maintained its standard of sf-and-fantasy art books but has kept changing hands over the years, is now an imprint of Chrysalis Books plc, 64 Brewery Road, London N7 9NT.) 20th November 2002.

Erikson, Steven. **House of Chains: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04625-0, xix+762pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £18.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; fourth of a promised ten-volume sequence of tomes by this Canadian author; it begins: "Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrefying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-lagged crabs...") 5th December 2002.

Feist, Raymond E., and Joel Rosenberg. **Murder in LaMut.** "Legends of the Rift-war." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224721-6, 324pp, C-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; second in what appears to be a sharecropped series, following *Honoured Enemy* [2001] which was by Feist and William Forstchen.) 2nd December 2002.

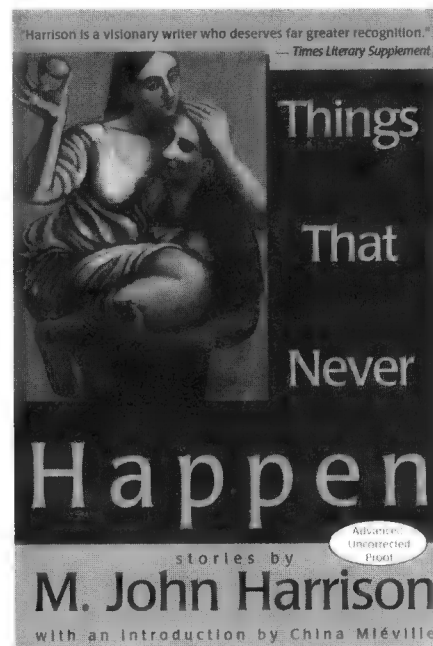
Finch, Paul. **Cape Wrath.** Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-60-X, 123pp, trade paperback, £8. (Horror novella, first edition; for ordering information see the publishers' website: www.telos.co.uk; the author is British and has written short stories and TV scripts; this would appear to be his first approach at a novel; it concerns the ghost of a viking chief, and features – inevitably – the ghastly form of execution known as the "blood-eagle.") No date shown; received in November 2002.

Fox, Derek M. **Jackdaw.** Prime Books [PO Box 36503, Canton, OH 44735, USA], ISBN 1-894815-17-3, 175pp, trade paperback, cover by Theo Badiu, \$15. (Horror novel, first edition; by a British writer who has already published several small-press books, it's set in a near future in which the monarchy has been dissolved and the prime minister assassinated – for all that, it seems fairly light in tone; to order, see the website:



www.primebooks.net; Prime Books is a recently-established print-on-demand publishing business run by Sean Wallace.) Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.

Glut, Donald F. **The Frankenstein Archive: Essays on the Monster, the Myth, the Movies, and More.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1353-0, vii+225pp, trade paperback, \$28.50. (Illustrated collection of miscellaneous essays on all aspects of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its adaptations; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; although it's well-informed, the tone of



the book is light and fannish rather than academic: it includes such chapter headings as "The Beatles Meet Frankenstein"; there is an index.) November 2002.

Greenberg, Martin H., and Russell Davis, eds. **Apprentice Fantastic.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0093-7, 319pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains 13 all-original stories about wizards' apprentices [and similar], by David Bischoff, Charles de Lint, Esther Friesner, Sarah A. Hoyt, Tanya Huff, David D. Levine, Jane Lindskold, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Dean Wesley Smith, Michelle West and others; this is, in effect, the latest issue of the more-or-less monthly DAW/Greenberg "pulp magazine.") November 2002.

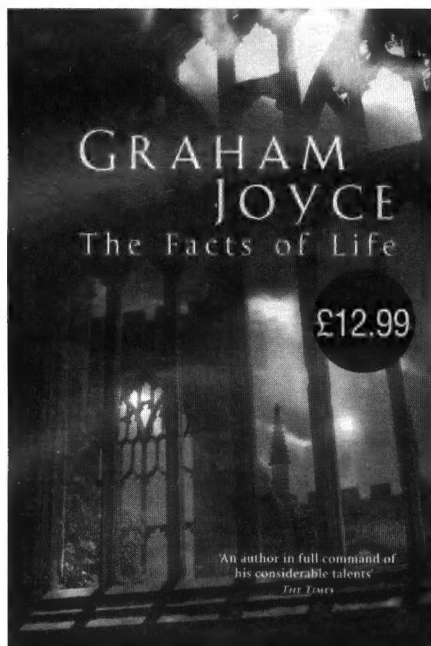
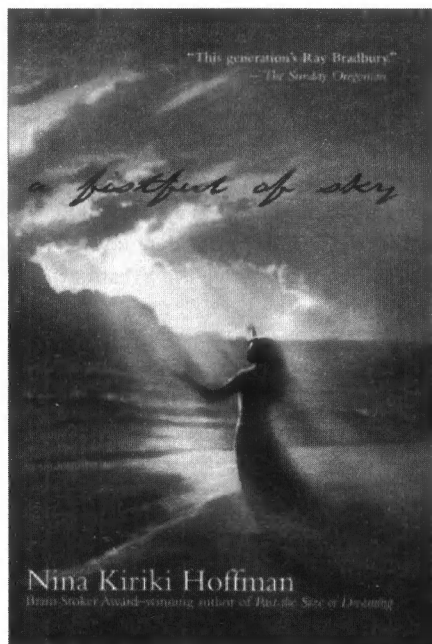
Harrison, Harry. **50 in 50: A Collection of Short Stories, One for Each of Fifty Years.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87790-0, 623pp, trade paperback, cover by Vincent Di Fate, \$18.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 2001; a welcome 50th anniversary volume by a veteran American writer; with its autobiographical introduction and brief header notes to each thematic section, the blurb describes it as "at once a memoir, a compendium of an engaging body of work, and a look at the history of science fiction in the second half of the twentieth century"; that's a bit of an exaggeration, but it's certainly a substantial collection of the author's best stories.) 19th November 2002.

Harrison, M. John. **Things That Never Happen: Stories.** Introduction by China Miéville. Night Shade Books [501 S. Willamette St., Newberg, OR 97132, USA], ISBN 1-892389-33-9, 449pp, trade paperback, cover by David Lloyd, \$15. (Sf/fantasy/horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$27 [not seen] and a signed, limited, slipcased edition priced at \$60 [not seen]; billed as "the definitive short story collection," this volume gathers 24 of Mike Harrison's best pieces, dating from the 1970s to the present and including several which first appeared in *Interzone* – "The New Rays" [1982], "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" [1985; here retitled "A Young Man's Journey to London"], "Anima" [1992] and "The East" [1996]; in addition to Miéville's interesting prefatory essay, there are also a short introduction and nine pages of story notes by the author; recommended.) 7th January 2003.

Harvey, John D. **The Cleansing.** Arkham House [PO Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583, USA], ISBN 0-87054-181-1, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Tony Patrick, \$32.95. (Horror novel, first edition; apparently a debut novel, it "tells the story of a violent American Indian wolf god, Wanata, who comes to Earth to make humanity accountable for its abuses against nature.") *Late entry: 25th October publication, received in November 2002.*

Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. **A Fistful of Sky.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00975-1, 353pp, hardcover, cover by Judy York, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a new stand-alone "contemporary fantasy," not labelled as a juvenile but probably slanted to the female young-adult market, by the author of *A Red Heart of Memories* [1999], *Past the Size of Dreaming* [2001] and other books.) *November 2002.*

Hughes, Rhys. **Nowhere Near Milkwood.** Prime Books [PO Box 36503, Canton, OH 44735, USA], ISBN 1-894815-11-4, 264pp, trade paperback, cover by Theo Badiu, \$17.95. (Horror/fantasy/sf collection, first edition; it contains over 30 varied stories by a Welsh small-press writer of growing repute; the back-cover commendations, all glowing, are by Brian Aldiss, T. E. D. Klein, Michael Moorcock and Jeff VanderMeer; see the publishers' website – www.primebooks.net – for further information.) *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.*



Irwin, Robert. **The Arabian Nightmare.** Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-73-9, 266pp, B-format paperback, cover by Willi Gray, £6.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1983; this is the fourth Dedalus printing [and, in between times, it was also a Viking hardcover and a Penguin paperback] of Irwin's oft-praised fantasy, "one of the great works of 20th century fiction.") *28th November 2002.*

Jacoby, Kate. **Rebel's Cage.** "Fourth Book of Elita." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07295-4, 498pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; "Kate Jacoby" is a pseudonym of Australian author Tracey Oliphant.) *14th November 2002.*

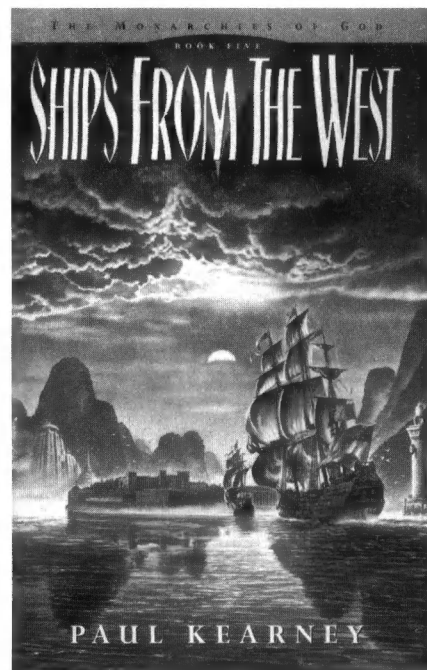
Jacoby, Kate. **Trial of Fire: Fifth Book of Elita.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06889-2, xiii+441pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the final volume in the five-book series; "Kate Jacoby" is a pseudonym of Australian author Tracey Oliphant.) *21st November 2002.*

Jamieson, Trent, and Garry Nurrish, eds. **Redsine Ten.** Prime Books [PO Box 36503, Canton, OH 44735, USA], ISBN 1-894815-03-3, 143pp, trade paperback, \$6. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; although masquerading as an American paperback, this is in fact an Australian periodical – billed on the reverse title page as "a quarterly magazine of dark fantasy & horror," this issue dated October 2002 – and its editorial address is: PO

Box 1287, Toowong, Queensland 4006, Australia; it contains about 15 stories by mainly unknown, presumably Antipodean writers [although at least a couple of the names, Forrest Aguirre and M. F. Korn, are recognizably American], plus a reprint story by James Sallis [well, it's "reprint" if you count prior appearance on a website] and an interview with Brian Stableford conducted by Nick Gevers; there is no other non-fiction editorial content, not even brief notes on the authors; the publishers have also sent us three back numbers – 7, 8 and 9, dated January, April and July 2002, each containing a similar mix, including a Nick Gevers interview [with Elizabeth Hand, Tim Powers and Kim Newman, respectively].) *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.*

Joyce, Graham. **The Facts of Life.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07230-X, 263pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Mainstream/horror [?] novel, first edition; the author, his publishers remind us again, is a four-times winner of the British Fantasy Award for Best Novel; released at a bargain price, this is a tale set during and after World War II, and involving the bombing of the city of Coventry by the Luftwaffe; as usual, Joyce keeps us guessing as to whether or not there's any actual fantasy content.) *5th December 2002.*

Kearney, Paul. **Ships from the West: Book 5 of The Monarchies of God.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06575-3, 296pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99.

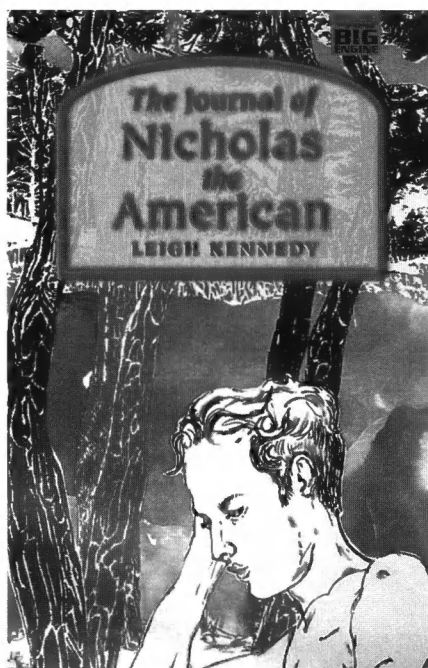


(Fantasy novel, first edition; this volume comes nearly three years after the previous book in the series, *The Second Empire* [March 2000]; it has a nice, resonant title, a title which evokes Western European civilization's impact on the rest of the world these past 500 years – in which case, it seems a pity that Kearney is writing about a fantasy world, and not about real history.)
5th December 2002.

Kennedy, Leigh. **The Journal of Nicholas the American.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-11-6, v+182pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1986; a tale about a "tele-empath," it is something of a minor classic – too long out of print; for ordering information, see the publisher's website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) November 2002.

Lewis, C. S. **The Cosmic Trilogy.** Voyager, 0-00-715413-5, 167+228+xii+428pp, three B-format paperback volumes in a boxed set, covers by Jim Burns, £20. (Trilogy of sf/fantasy novels, first edition in this form; the three novels it contains, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*, were first published separately in the UK, 1938, 1943 and 1945; these editions, not previously seen by us, were originally published by Voyager in 2000, priced at £6.99 each; the first two [slim] volumes of this "Cosmic Trilogy" [also known as the "Ransom" trilogy, after the name of the protagonist] are set on the planets Mars and Venus and are classics of the British scientific romance – or, more exactly, the anti-scientific romance – while the third [fat] volume crosses genres to become an earthbound fantasy somewhat akin to Charles Williams's supernatural thrillers of the same period; unlike the first two books, the third carries a subtitle: "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups.") 4th November 2002.

Lowder, James, ed. **The Book of More Flesh.** "They won't stay dead!" Eden Studios [6 Dogwood Lane, Loudonville, NY 12211, USA], ISBN 1-891153-86-2, 318pp, trade paperback, cover by Christopher Shy, \$16.95. (Horror anthology, first edition; an all-original zombie volume, it appears to be a follow-up to an earlier anthology, *The Book of All Flesh*, which we didn't see; there are 23 flesh-eating stories here, by Douglas W. Clark,



Don D'Amassa, David Dvorkin, Scott Edelman, Paul Finch, Charles Coleman Finlay, J. Robert King, Claude Lalumière, Tom Piccirilli, Darrell Schweitzer, Shane Stewart and others; Lowder's introduction is dated "August 2003"... er, some mistake, surely?) Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.

Lucas, George, Donald F. Glut and James Kahn. **The Star Wars Trilogy.** "The 25th Anniversary Edition." Warner, ISBN 1-84149-250-7, 505pp, B-format paperback, cover by Ralph McQuarrie, £9.99. (Sf movie-novelization omnibus, first published in the USA, 1995; previous editions were entitled *Star Wars Omnibus*; it contains *Star Wars: A New Hope* by Lucas [ghost-written by Alan Dean Foster], *The Empire Strikes Back* by Glut, and *Return of the Jedi* by Kahn, originally published in 1976, 1980 and 1983 respectively.) November 2002.

McIntosh, Neil. **Star of Erengard.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-265-2, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin Hanford, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; this is a debut novel by a Brighton-resident writer [born 1957] who has co-written book reviews for *Interzone* with Neil Jones.) November 2002.

Marcellas, Diana. **The Sea Lark's Song.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87483-9, cover by Tris-tan Elwell, 525pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to *Mother Ocean, Daughter Sea* [2001], this Big Commercial Fantasy tome from a

new writer comes with praise for the author's talents from Elizabeth Haydon, Morgan Llywelyn and *Romantic Times*.)
18th December 2002.

Masterton, Graham. **The Manitou.** "A Telos Classic." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-70-7, 209pp, trade paperback, cover artist uncredited, £9.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1975; there is a simultaneous limited hardcover edition priced at £30 [not seen]; for ordering information see the publishers' website: www.telos.co.uk; this 25th anniversary edition contains a new four-page introduction by the author, and restores the novel's original ending.) Late entry: 31st October publication, received in November 2002.

Messingham, Simon. **The Infinity Race.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53863-5, 273pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it's set on a planet famed for yacht races across "the friction-nullifying light water that covers its surface.") 4th November 2002.

Monteleone, Thomas F. **Eyes of the Virgin.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87874-5, cover by Greg Spalenka, 301pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first edition; apparently the author's first new novel since *The Blood of the Lamb* [1992]; he seems to have a distinctly Roman Catholic imagination.) 11th December 2002.

Powers, Tim. **The Drawing of the Dark.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 33." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07426-4, 328pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jan Breughel the Elder, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1979; in which Powers's 16th-century mercenary hero Brian Duffy finds himself in Vienna, "besieged by the Turkish armies of Suleiman; and it becomes apparent that Duffy's presence is no accident and that it is up to him to preserve the West until the drawing of the dark..."; the theme seems timely; the series number of this volume appears to be wrong; the previous month's book, William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland and Other Novels*, was numbered "33," so by rights this book should be number 34.)
14th November 2002.

Salvatore, R. A. **Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones.** Century/Lucas-Books, ISBN 1-844-13000-2, 353pp, C-

format paperback, cover by Steven D. Anderson, £10.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 2002; it's "based upon the story by George Lucas and the screenplay by George Lucas and Jonathan Hales.") 7th November 2002.

Shatner, William, with Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens. **Captain's Peril.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-4819-7, 335pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Gerber, £14.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; this is the American first edition of October 2002 with a British price added; it looks to be the first of a new sub-series of "Captain Kirk" novels ostensibly co-written by actor Shatner but actually wordsmithed by the Reeves-Stevens.) 4th November 2002.

Smith, Clark Ashton. **The Last Oblivion: Best Fantastic Poems of Clark Ashton Smith.** Edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz. Hippocampus Press [PO Box 641, New York, NY 10156, USA], ISBN 0-9673215-5-7, 194pp, trade paperback, cover by the author, \$15. (Fantasy verse collection, first edition; a handsomely produced and very well-edited selection of Smith's dense, romantic, old-fashioned poetry, taken from volumes ranging from *The Star-Treader and Other Poems* [1912] to *The Hill of Dionysus* [1962], and also including "more than two dozen unpublished or uncollected poems, never previously included in any of Smith's books"; it also contains an introduction, glossary, bibliography, index by title, index by first line, and two colour plates of paintings by Smith; recommended.)

ommended.) *Late entry: 31st October publication, received in November 2002.*

Steele, Allen M. **Coyote: A Novel of Interstellar Exploration.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00974-3, x+390pp, hardcover, cover by Ron Miller, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a revised "fix-up" of eight stories which first appeared in *Asimov's SF* during 2001 and 2002, it comes with a glowing front-cover commendation from Stephen Baxter: "An homage to wonder, hope, and determination... Steele has constructed this glorious tale of a new starflung *Mayflower* from the legacies of Heinlein, Twain, Hemingway, and others – and he has founded it on the essence of America"; wow – that'll take some living up to.) November 2002.

Tepper, Sheri S. **Raising the Stones.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-325-4, 465pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Rawlings, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 54.) 14th November 2002.

Topping, Keith. **Beyond the Gate: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to Stargate SG-1.** Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-50-2, 286pp, trade paperback, cover by Dariusz Jasiczak, £9.99. (Unillustrated guide to the sf TV series created by Brad Wright and Jonathan Glassner [and spun off from the movie *Stargate* (1994), written by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich]; first edition; for ordering information see the publishers' website: www.telos.co.uk; the book is sizeable, very detailed, and nicely produced.) 1st November 2002.

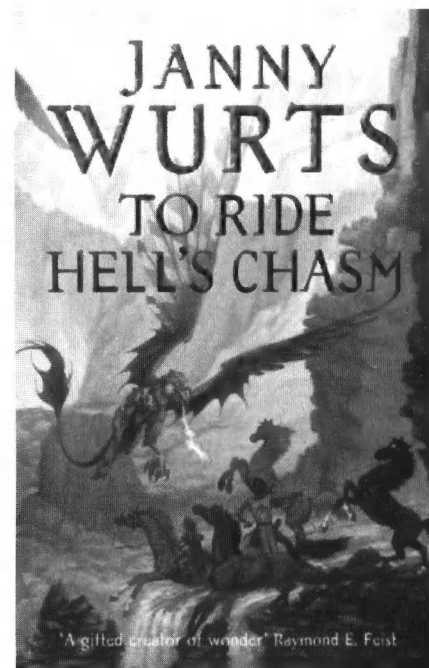
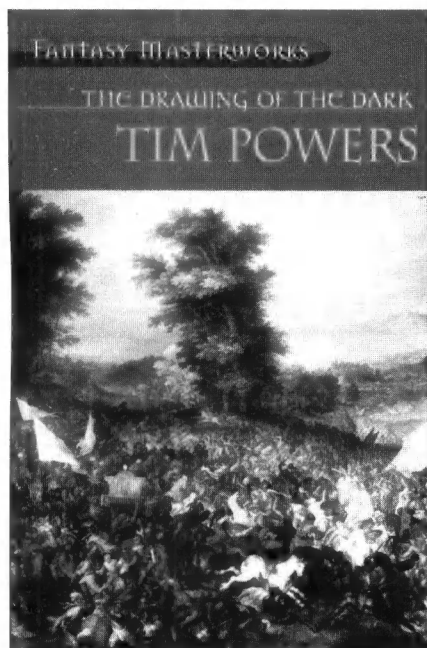
Watson, Ian. **Harlequin: Book 2 of the Inquisition War.** "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-255-5, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1994 [not "1995" as its states inside]; a Gothic space opera of considerable inventiveness and atmosphere.) *Late entry: October publication, received in November 2002.*

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **Ithnalin's Restoration.** "A Legend of Ethshar." Tor, ISBN 0-765-30012-5, 272pp, hardcover, cover by Daniel Horne, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; eighth in the loose series of light, frothy "Ethshar" novels, following *Night of Madness* [2000].) 18th December 2002.

Williams, Walter Jon. **Destiny's Way.** "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Century/LucasBooks, ISBN 0-7126-2358-2, xii+448pp, hardcover, cover by Cliff Nielsen, £16.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time Walter Jon Williams has dipped his toe into the waters of spinoffery.) *Late entry: 3rd October publication, received in November 2002.*

Winter, Douglas E. **Clive Barker: The Dark Fantastic.** "The Authorized Biography." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-715092-X, xiv+671pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Biography of a leading horror writer and film-maker, first published in 2001; as we commented on the first edition, "is it really the appropriate time yet for an exhaustive 700-page biography of a writer who was born in the 1950s and is still presumably in mid-career?; ah, well, maybe so, given the subject's Hollywood connections.") *Late entry: 21st October publication, received in November 2002.*

Wurts, Janny. **To Ride Hell's Chasm.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710109-0, 483pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £18.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?], 2001; this appears to be a one-off medieval fantasy – not part of the author's "Wars of Light and Shadow" series; it has a post-9/11-type dedication: "For the warriors, may they keep their hearts open...") 2nd December 2002.



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